

**KNOWLEDGE WITHOUT LEGISLATION?  
THE CHANGING ROLE OF THE INTELLECTUAL  
IN AN ERA OF PLURALISM**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Writers across a wide range of disciplines within the humanities and the social sciences claim that we now live in a postmodern age characterised by the demise of the basic tenets of modernism. These writers contend that this postmodern age is marked by a profound sense of uncertainty. Out of this uncertainty has emerged what many theorists view as a radical 'crisis of authority' for the contemporary intellectual. Subsequently, a debate has ensued as to whether this 'crisis' has sounded the death knoll for the modern legislative intellectual or has merely led to a cosmetic rearrangement of authoritative discourses within the academy. This thesis acknowledges that there has been, at the very least, a general problematisation of conventional approaches to knowledge. At the same time it questions whether this so-called postmodern shift in the conceptualisation of knowledge offers an approach conducive to a radical politics of emancipation. With these issues in mind, I examine the claims of three 'interpretive' or postmodern theorists. I suggest that the pluralist affirmation of difference proposed by these writers may represent a new cultural 'logic' no less repressive than its modernist predecessor.

## **PREFACE**

Whether one agrees that we have entered a new age, a postmodern era signifying the fall of modernism, or not, contemporary critics would, I believe, generally affirm that the field of representation has undergone a radical change in the past two decades. Accompanying this change has been a heated debate about whether the so-called ‘grand narratives’ of modernity, such as the modernist faith in the autonomy of the intellectual, still have tenure in contemporary society. In particular, there has been a general problematisation within the humanities of the modernist claim to a ‘sovereign reason’ existing outside of the influence of culture. By foregrounding the conventional and constructed nature of narrative, postmodern theorists have placed into question the notion that the practice of representation can be neutral or transparent.

This thesis is concerned with the impact that these contemporary critiques have had on the role of the intellectual in society. The general scepticism shown towards any assertions of authority based upon modernist conceptions of reason and rationality seems to render problematic the intellectual’s claim of a privileged relation to knowledge. Zygmunt Bauman, a prominent sociologist, suggests that we are witnessing a dramatic shift within the academy away from the legislative concerns of the modern intellectual to a new interpretive and anti-authoritarian approach to knowledge. My interest lies in examining the validity of these claims and in discussing the possible impact that this so-called ‘interpretive turn’ might have on the politics of representation and issues of difference.

I open my thesis with an overview of Bauman’s work, using his broad sweeping theories about the role of the intellectual in contemporary society in order to set up a

framework of analysis through which to view the work of three theorists: Richard Rorty, a philosopher; James Clifford, an anthropologist; and Patti Lather, a feminist theorist in the area of education. I utilise the critical work of these theorists in order to both underscore the validity of Bauman's claim that the contemporary intellectual's status as a privileged possessor of knowledge is indeed under attack but, at the same time, to problematise his notion that the legislative intellectual has been displaced by an intellectual whose concerns are purely interpretive.

While for the most part I concur with Bauman's observation that intellectual inquiry within the humanities has undergone some dramatic changes over recent years, the point of contention for me is whether those changes really represent a departure from modernist legislative concerns. The three theorists that I have chosen to focus on all contribute to the claim that the demise of modernist metanarratives has been accompanied by a 'dispersal' of authority, and suggest the possibility of a more democratic, pluralist approach to knowledge. My aim in this thesis is to problematise this assertion. I question the degree to which the radical and liberatory claims of the interpretive thinkers I have chosen can be translated into a truly non-legislative discourse.

I think it is important to note at this point that I do not wish to present my work as a comprehensive discussion of the concrete problems of authority encountered in specific disciplines. I have chosen to focus on theorists who hail from anthropology, education and philosophy in order to illustrate the widespread, inter-disciplinary nature of issues relating to modern versus postmodern practices of authority. In this sense my thesis emerges from a cultural studies, rather than an intra-disciplinary, approach in that the orientation of my work is comparative and meta-theoretical. Within this cultural studies model my theoretical leanings lie somewhere between a

critical, self-reflexive ethnography and the Continental philosophical insights of Foucault. This is reflected in the final chapter of my thesis where I briefly discuss Rabinow's figure of the Cosmopolitan as a possible model of intellectualism that displaces Bauman's legislative/interpretive dichotomy with a much more fluid interplay between pragmatic, local concerns and constraints and a global network of power relations.

# I

## THE DEATH OF CERTAINTY : EMBRACING AMBIVALENCE



Having been trained to live in necessity, we have found ourselves living in contingency. And yet, being bound to live in contingency, we can, as Heller suggests, make 'an attempt to transform it into our destiny'. One makes something a destiny by embracing the fate: by an act of choice and the will to remain loyal to the choice made. Abandoning the vocabulary parasitic on the hope of (or determination for) universality, certainty and transparency is the first choice to be made; the first step on the road to emancipation.

Zygmunt Bauman

Writers across the disciplines, ranging from the arts to the social sciences, inform the reader that we now live in a postmodern age. The term postmodernism is one that is variously used but often poorly defined. For Ramon Selden (1989) postmodernism describes a particular world view characterised by a rejection of the basic tenets of modernism and a "profound sense of ontological uncertainty" (p. 72). While this all-pervasive sense of anxiety and loss in the face of the death of modernity's 'grand narratives' is often seen as reflecting a general cultural condition, my interest lies in exploring the utility of the concept of postmodernity as a term that exemplifies the experience of the intellectual in contemporary society. As Zygmunt Bauman (1992) proposes, the concept of postmodernity captures particularly well the identity crisis that the intellectual, representing a pivotal social category in contemporary society, is currently undergoing. One reason for this climate of uncertainty stems from the fact that the cultural realm over which the modern intellectual once authoritatively presided is now a contested territory. Bauman asserts that there has been a dramatic shift in the way that we construct 'culture' in contemporary society. While modernity represented an era of certainty where the intellectual could confidently call upon universal, Western 'values' in order to maintain consistent cultural standards, it seems that in the postmodern era the notion of cultural homogeneity has become highly problematic.

As the social construction of culture undergoes a radical revision so too the epistemological foundations of academic authority have begun to shift. The displacement of the traditional model of culture in which knowledge is seen to be ordered in a hierarchical and exclusive fashion, by a more democratic conception of culture that emphasises diversity and difference, calls into question the legitimacy and utility of modernity's so-called grand narratives of rationality and progress in a postmodern age. Furthermore, Bauman asserts that the demise of a modernist notion of culture relates, in part at least, to the displacement of the integrating role of the nation state by a pluralist consumer-oriented society. Thus the combination of an apparently radical shift in social structure alongside a growing sense of the obsolescence of the fundamental tenets underpinning modern notions of epistemology has forced intellectuals to scrutinise their own claims to authority within a traditionally hierarchical and disciplinary system of knowledge.

The central focus of this thesis lies with examining the effects that this 'crisis of legitimation' has had on the academy. Like Bauman, I would argue that the hermeneutic or 'interpretive' direction being taken by many contemporary social theorists is a symptom of, and a pragmatic response to, the perceived demise of Enlightenment reason as the primary discourse of legitimation within the academy. My discussion centres primarily on the work of three theorists: Richard Rorty, a philosopher; James Clifford, an anthropologist; and Patti Lather, a feminist theorist in the area of education. I have chosen these particular intellectuals because for me their writing exemplifies this new interpretive approach to knowledge. I have also deliberately chosen to examine theorists from different academic disciplines in order to illustrate the widespread and inter-disciplinary nature of this hermeneutic 'turn' and its associated blurring of disciplinary boundaries.

After highlighting the common themes that run through the work of these contemporary theorists I investigate Bauman's thesis that these new theoretical approaches reflect a major break away from authoritarian, monologic approaches to knowledge. Here, Bauman's pivotal concept of ambivalence will be utilised as a means of framing my discussion.<sup>1</sup> While the move from structural to discursive modes of inquiry that Bauman describes may in part reflect a pragmatic response to an increasing awareness of the complexity of the social world, my interest lies also in examining this privileging of the interpretative mode within the academy as a strategic means of redefining/recapturing an authoritative intellectual voice within the cultural realm. Where once the modern intellectual perceived the world in terms of order and certainty, theorists like Clifford have rejected what they see as modernity's futile and questionable search for certainty. Emerging from a postmodern experience of uncertainty and instability, these 'interpretive' intellectuals have embraced ambivalence not only as an ontology but, more importantly, as a radical epistemological strategy.

A material example of this general shift towards an epistemology of 'fluidity' is the recent emergence of cultural studies as a radical, transdisciplinary academic arena. The development of cultural studies attests not only to a growing awareness of the permeable nature of disciplinary boundaries but also represents an attempt by the academy to develop more 'culturally relevant' models of social analysis in terms of representing heterogeneity. Sociologists, increasingly aware of the inadequacies

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<sup>1</sup> In *Modernity and Ambivalence* (1993), Bauman uses the theme of ambivalence in his critique of modernity's quest for order. He rallies against the modern pursuit of certainty as an act of philosophical violence that results in the suppression of difference. In particular, he argues that the Holocaust was an outcome of the modern war against ambivalence and ambiguity rather than the one-off historical event it is popularly conceived as. He concludes that, as givens of everyday existence, we must learn to live with ambivalence and heterogeneity.

of rigid structuralist approaches to social analysis, are turning to urban ethnography as a means of theorising social complexity. For example, Ulf Hannerz (1992), a theorist working in the field of the sociology of culture, attempts to conceptualise the “patterns of process in contemporary cultures” (p. 46) in a way that incorporates the complexity and ambiguity of present-day cultural flow. Such an approach entails moving beyond the rather static language of structuralism to a more fluid notion of cultural processes as encompassed within Hannerz’s four organisational frameworks; forms of life, market, state and movement. While these frameworks suggest some degree of structural organisation their boundaries are permeable and overlapping indicating Hannerz’s desire to capture the diffuse and decentered nature of cultural processes.

While Hannerz’s work emerges out of a long tradition of symbolic interactionism, it also reflects what Norman Denzin identifies as a shifting of “the focus of interest in interactionist thought toward the terrain of cultural studies” (In Dickens, 1994, p. 103). The sociologists-cum-ethnographers emerging out of this new theoretical trend towards cultural studies are part of a new breed who are concerned with experimentation and hybridisation at the level of knowledge systems. As a kind of postmodern avant garde, this group of theorists is driven by a desire to transgress rather than construct epistemological boundaries, to celebrate fluidity rather than closure.

This new construction of knowledge along fluid and non-hierarchical lines, as represented in the work of Rorty, Clifford and Lather, is, as stated previously, in part a response to what Bauman sees as the radical shift in the way we view ‘culture’ in western society. It is important then to examine the nature of this supposed shift as a means of contextualising the concerns of these three theorists. Although I take

issue with the sweeping nature and at times functionalist tendencies of Bauman's claims, his meta-theoretical overview of the academy and its relation to dominant social and cultural forms provides a useful frame for my discussion. Accordingly, some time will be spent discussing Bauman's thesis regarding modernity and postmodernity, legislation and interpretation before embarking on an analysis and overview of the interpretative school of thought.

### **The Death of Modern Culture, the Birth of Pluralism**

The ideology of culture, Bauman (1992) argues, is a product of modernity. Prior to the advent of modernity the notion of culture as an autonomous, man-made realm had little relevancy. One of the central premises of modernity then is the discovery of a nature/culture dichotomy. Culture, as the privileged term within this binary opposition, becomes synonymous with a process of humanisation involving "the acquisition of knowledge" and the concomitant suppression of natural or 'instinctive' behaviours (p. 3).

For Bauman it is no accident that the birth of culture, perceived as a civilising process, was accompanied by the rise of the modern intellectual in the early 18th century. With the development of a modernist notion of culture wherein "the world [was represented] as consisting of human beings who are what they are taught" (p. 3), the role of the modern intellectual as knowledge shaper and cultural authority came into being. Given the modern realisation "that human order is vulnerable, contingent and devoid of reliable foundations" (p. xi), it became the role of the intellectual to provide a theoretical basis for the rational management of social processes. As we will see, according to Bauman, this role tended to draw the

modern intellectual into complicity with the surveillance and ordering functions of the state apparatus.

Bauman, following a conventional sociological model of tradition versus modernity, asserts that the communal autonomy associated with pre-modern or traditional society was eradicated with the rise of a supra-communal, state-based form of social control where “certainty, orderliness [and] homogeneity became the orders of the day” (p. xiv). In contrast with the perceived chaotic primitivism associated with the cultural diversity of pre-modern existence, the ambition of the modern state was to develop an ‘enlightened’, collective order guided by external standards of reason, rationality and progress. Culture, as an ideological construct in modernity, thus became a realm associated with the regulation or civilisation of human life. Given this concern with encouraging homogeneity rather than difference, anything that escaped this ordering process, that is, “the grey area of ambivalence, indeterminacy and undecidability” (p. xvi) was seen to be modernity’s enemy.

The nation state’s ambition to organise the social world along rationalistic lines was accompanied by the emergence of a distinct hierarchy of knowledge whereby universalist models of knowledge were privileged over localised, popular or pragmatic forms of understanding. In the modernist battle against indeterminacy then, the intellectual as the guardian of ‘legitimate’ knowledge emerged as a powerful ally in establishing and authorising the norms and principles of ‘rational’ social organisation and individual conduct. Structuralism, in particular, given its central concern with discovering the rules and structures governing social life, “translated...the uniforming ambitions of modernity from a normative project into the analytic framework for making sense of reality” (p. 54). As a school of thought

more interested in theories of social reproduction than innovation, structuralism naturally emerged out of and contributed to a modernist milieu characterised by a faith in certainty. This sense of ‘philosophical certainty’ was in part underpinned by assumptions of cultural superiority as evidenced by the imperialist acts associated with the “colonial episode of modernity” (p. 13).

However as this absolute faith in reason became more and more untenable in the face of “the accumulated pressure of adversary evidence” (p. 13-14) the confidence placed in Western values diminished. Bauman argues that the deepest blow to modern self-confidence, however, stemmed from a growing gap “between the intellectuals, as collective guardians of societal values, and the modern state” (p. 14). In fact with the development of sophisticated political technologies of surveillance and seduction the legitimacy role of the intellectual was rapidly becoming obsolete. Meanwhile, as the realm of culture was becoming increasingly subsumed within the market sphere, intellectuals found themselves being displaced from the role of cultural authority by agents of the market.

According to Bauman the changing status of the intellectual in today’s postmodern society has been accompanied by a complete turnaround in the way culture is perceived. Where once the modern intellectual sought to tame cultural diversity in the name of universal standards, the tendency today is to encourage rather than to suppress difference. Thus, while culture is still viewed as a process of ‘humanisation’, the desire to regulate this process has been displaced by new ‘cultural values’ whereby the “perpetual, irreducible...diversity of human kind” (p. 18) is seen as something that intellectuals must defend.

Accompanying this apparent shift in the perception of culture, Bauman suggests that we are witnessing perhaps an equally dramatic epistemological shift away from viewing knowledge as a *legislative* tool towards an *interpretive* approach to reason. Such a claim suggests more than an epistemological shift contained within the ranks of conventional thought. Instead it promises a fundamental move away from a hierarchical model of knowledge underpinned by notions of an external and stable standard of truth and reason. In a postmodern era characterised by the “permanent and irreducible *pluralism* of cultures” (p. 102), the focus of concern becomes not how to homogenise the cultural realm but how “to secure communication and mutual understanding between cultures” (p. 102). Thus, in drawing authority from an interpretive rather than a legislative role in society Bauman argues that the intellectual moves from servicing “the structure of domination (to facilitating) the process of reciprocal communication” (p. 126).

The transformation of modern culture has been accompanied by a resurgence of interest in the cultural realm in the academy. However, this renewed interest seems to represent a recognition of the obsolescence of modernist notions of culture rather than an attempt at reclaiming legislative authority. Instead of reproducing another totalising model of culture, postmodern intellectuals are, as Bauman suggests, seeking to rethink culture in a much more complex and differentiated way. The new concern with pluralism and difference calls for a completely new approach to the study of culture. As the role of the intellectual shifts from that of cultural overseer to interpreter, the process of cultural inquiry involves a more localised focus on the multiple ‘life worlds’ that are seen to make up the cultural realm rather than seeking a totalising, homogeneous overview. Instead of trying to extract cultural processes from their local contexts and universalising the particular meanings of cultural



events, the emphasis falls on examining cultural context itself and its local meanings, as characterised by Geertz's notion of 'thick description'.<sup>2</sup>

Such an approach to representing the cultural reflects a new intellectual mode of being where knowledge, having no recourse to extralinguistical standards of correctness only has validity within the bounds of a particular community of discourse. In this interpretive model of reason, truth claims are viewed as particular, contingent and contestable. Consequently, with no external standards of agreement, communication between systems of knowledge becomes problematic. Peters (1992), quoting Featherstone, contends that the role of the intellectual becomes that of cultural interpreter liaising between discursive fields, translating and interpreting "the multiplicity of life-worlds and language games from the human cultural archive" (p. 30). With this redefinition of culture from an objective, structured *entity* to a "spontaneous *process* [my emphasis]...free of an overall design and perpetuated by diffusely deployed powers" (Bauman, 1992, p. 23), the study of culture becomes a hermeneutic exercise where issues of politics and domination are displaced by problems of interpretation and meaning.

While modernity's rational ordered conception of culture was accompanied by a desire to legislate against difference, there appears to be a more liberatory intent underlying the contemporary emphasis on cultural diversity. The interpretive intellectual, in emphasising a more postmodern approach to culture with its accompanied displacement of traditional, rigid categories based on distinctions

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<sup>2</sup> Utilising a Weberian language of interpretation, Geertz "embraces understanding and particularism while rejecting causal explanation" (Biersack, 1989, p. 75). For Geertz, cultural analysis involves what he terms 'thick description', where 'thickness' denotes the symbolic value of particular social acts. Such an approach involves 'reading' cultural processes and action as symbolically meaningful texts in their own right rather than imposing a functionalist cause-and-effect model onto the complex and often contradictory nature of social action.

between high and low culture, appears to advocate a more democratic focus on difference. However, theorists like Fredric Jameson (1989) have sought to problematise this apparent democratisation of culture. Jameson is sceptical of the supposed radicalism of intellectuals who align themselves with a cultural politics of pluralism. While on the one hand cultural pluralism contains a radical impulse in that it problematises hierarchies of knowledge, at the same time Jameson voices concerns that “the very concept of differentiation...is itself a systemic one” (p. 35) derived from the cultural logic of late capitalism. It is important then to view the liberatory claims of the interpretive intellectuals that I discuss in this thesis in a critical manner taking into account Michael Peters’ (1992) observation that in postmodern society “cultural production has reached a stage where reflexive, critical distance from it is both less obvious and less possible” (p. 26).

### **The Logic of Ambivalence: Recapturing Intellectual Authority?**

The condition of postmodernity can be seen as representing a crisis of the role and status of intellectuals in general. If the intellectual must “renounce a position of privilege” (Peters, 1992, p. 21) as a cultural authority where does the legitimacy of intellectual discourse now reside? The increasing prevalence of interpretive rather than legislative strategies suggests a “contemporary reorientation of cultural discourse” that reflects “the changing experience of intellectuals, as they seek to re-establish their social function..in a world ill-fit for their traditional role” (Bauman, 1993, p. 24). Such interpretive strategies are no longer founded on external imposed standards of truth. Instead, they call upon a logic of difference; a logic that defies hierarchies of truth and knowledge and undermines any claim the modern intellectual might have had to a legislative reason.

The three theorists I discuss in this thesis self-consciously attempt to work through this crisis of authority in their writing. While the theoretical strategies they develop differ somewhat, all three theorists share a concern with actively reacting against the modern intellectual's legislative role. They seek to legitimate their social function as intellectuals through an outward rejection of the holy grail of modernity, the quest for certainty. Rather than attempting to reclaim some kind of authority founded on a totalising theory of knowledge, these theorists consciously resist imposing a systematised order on what they see as the chaos of everyday existence. In an effort to problematise modernity's obsession with order and hierarchy, they openly embrace ambivalence, uncertainty and ambiguity in their work. Ambivalence, as "the possibility of assigning an object or an event to more than one category" (p. 1), represents the antithesis of Aristotelian logic. Thus for the interpretive intellectual, ambivalence becomes more than a playful postmodern trope. Rather, in embracing the possibilities of ambivalence at an epistemological level these interpretive theorists seek to openly reject the tenets of western metaphysics.

Before proceeding with an examination of the work of Richard Rorty, the first of the interpretive theorists I discuss, it is necessary to briefly outline the relationship between western metaphysics and legislative reason. I see the work of interpretive theorists like Rorty as very much *post*-modern in its concerns and as such as emerging out of and as a reaction to modernity and its reliance on legislative reason. While the interpretive 'turn' taking place within the academy in part reflects a desire to come to terms with present concerns in a postmodern pluralist society, it also represents an attempt to deal with the past. The point of concern for postmodern theorists lies with the profoundly oppressive consequences of

modernity's supposedly liberatory goals. They claim that the dream of modernity with its humanist ideals has turned sour underscoring the "limits of reason and the obsolescence of modernist categories and institutions" (Lather, 1989, p. 5). In the hands of the modern intellectual it seems that reason has become a tool of domination legitimating state practices of social control.

In particular, the "naming and classifying" practices associated with the ordering strategies of legislative reason have a logical, if unintentional, affinity with the gatekeeping functions of the state (Bauman, 1993, p. 26). In the political realm, unity and order are achieved through the process of constructing a sharply demarcated 'organic structure' that eradicates any possibility of ambiguity. The state's attempt to purge the social order of ambivalence involves a clear demarcation of inside from outside, friend from enemy; that is, it relies on a process of segregation and exclusion.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, in the intellectual realm, the process of ordering knowledge involves practices of segregation and exclusion that result in "delegitimising all grounds of knowledge that are philosophically uncontrolled or uncontrollable" (p. 24). The system of hierarchical dualisms underpinning western metaphysics is centrally concerned with organising the world into discrete, mutually exclusive entities. Language, in accordance with its naming function, aims to impose a structure on "a contingent world of randomness" (p. 1) so that the world becomes an orderly place of probability and predictability rather than randomness and contingency. This structuring process entails eliminating randomness and incommensurability by sorting entities into assigned classes. The logic and

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<sup>3</sup> Bauman (1993) uses the example of the modern scientist's preoccupation with genetic homogeneity in order to illustrate the state's concern with eradicating ambivalence. For instance, he discusses the case of the Jewish psychiatrist, who in 1935 advocated the compulsory sterilisation of all heterozygous carriers of the "abnormal gene of schizophrenia" (p. 29) even though such a programme would involve sterilising 18 per cent of the total population. As Bauman demonstrates, Nazi Germany's focus on racial purity was one symptom of a much wider modern concern with social engineering in general.

systematicity of this process is guaranteed by the universal laws of reason. Given that the task of creating order is both the central concern of western metaphysics and the archetypal project of modernity (p. 4) it becomes possible to see how the ambitions of the modern state and of modern intellectuals might converge.

Bauman points out that the ‘discovery’ of order accompanied the development of a modern concern with *design* and *action*. Prior to this obsession with certainty, modern conceptions of chaos and order as mutually exclusive terms had no meaning. In modernity, chaos is perceived as the only alternative to order and, furthermore, order is the positively weighted term in the equation. Chaos is thus constructed in solely negative terms as the “other of order...the miasma of the indeterminate and unpredictable.” (p. 7). The modern intellectual is thus confined within a dialectical model of the world. Rather than accepting numerous ways of ordering/representing the world, this model depends on a binary opposition that sets “transparency against obscurity, clarity against fuzziness” (p. 7). This opposition represents a model of hierarchy and mastery where the chaotic, pre-human, ‘natural’ realm is subordinated to the artificial, humanising process of imposed order.

According to Bauman’s argument, it is apparent that the modern intellectual’s role revolves to a large extent around social engineering and design in an effort to “manage and administer existence” (p. 7). In this process the modern polity is centrally concerned with attempting to eradicate uncertainty and ambivalence. The rigid categorisation and naming processes that accompany this modern practice inevitably produce intolerance of difference. The ‘other’ then becomes everything that defies simple classification or chooses to define itself in a way which subverts official ordering systems. In modern intellectual discourse the other “is polysemy, cognitive dissonance, polyvalent definitions, contingency”. Western metaphysics

thus relies upon “reducing the flux and heterogeneity of experience into binary and supposedly natural or essentialist oppositions that include identity/difference, nature/culture” (Flax, 1990, p. 36) in order to represent reality as a coherent and unified whole.<sup>4</sup>

In contrast, the theorists I have chosen to discuss under the umbrella term of interpretive or postmodern theory share a concern with “what structures *exclude* in order to institute themselves as fictive totalities, as organised, coherent, homogeneous, logical systems” (Rabine, 1988, p. 13). Modernity’s totalising theories depend on excluding and repressing difference and ‘otherness’. However, as Bauman (1993) points out paradoxically the modern concern with order draws its impetus from a continual awareness of the impossibility of such an “ambivalence-eliminating project” (p. 9). As the blurring of categorical boundaries and the non-exclusivity of naming processes inevitably becomes apparent, ambivalence reveals itself to be a natural by-product of classificatory procedures. As Bauman indicates, the more rigid the structuring process the more likely the possibility of categorical ambiguity.

Thus the ‘metanarratives’ of modernity are haunted by a modern culture conscious of its own constructed and artificial nature. The search for order is always at the same time a response to, and negation of, the flux and impermanence of the external world.<sup>5</sup> It is this self-conscious awareness of the conventionality and constructedness of modernity’s own projects that seems to be at the root of the

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<sup>4</sup> This contemporary critique of modernity’s repressive aspects echoes the concerns of one the leading critics of Enlightenment thought, Max Weber. Weber problematised the Enlightenment thinker’s faith in the intrinsic connection between science, rationality and human freedom. Weber’s powerful image of the “iron cage” of bureaucratic rationality, in particular, reflects his belief that “the legacy of the Enlightenment was the triumph of ... purposive-instrumental rationality” that legislated against the possibility of universal freedom (In Harvey, 1989, p. 15).

<sup>5</sup> Marshall Berman (1983) captures this dialectic vision when he describes modernity as “a paradoxical unity, a unity of disunity: it pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish” (p. 15).

demise of the modern intellectual. The postmodern condition represents for the intellectual an experience of total self-recognition to the point where legislative practices can no longer be justified through a blind faith in reason. While the modern intellectual still seeks a deeper structure of understanding beneath the dialectic experience of modernity, the postmodern thinker sees nothing beyond the culturally constructed surface of modern existence.

The postmodern experience for the intellectual signifies then an acute awareness of the fictional, totalising and exclusionary nature of modernity's quest for certainty. The turn to interpretation reflects a desire to liberate intellectualism from the demands of legislative reason.<sup>6</sup> Rorty, Clifford and Lather, as interpretive thinkers sceptical of the authority or utility of reason, actively reclaim ambivalence and indeterminacy in their work as a means of undermining universalist claims to truth. As Jane Flax (1990) posits, ambivalence is "an appropriate response to an inherently conflictual situation. The problem lies not in the ambivalence, but in premature attempts to resolve or deny conflicts" (p. 11). Accordingly, the interpretive approach associated with postmodern theory involves "a refusal to avoid conflict and irresolvable differences or to synthesise these differences into a unitary, univocal whole" (p. 4).

In utilising the notion of ambivalence, however, I would argue that caution must be exercised in order not to revert to the kind of oppositional thinking that has

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<sup>6</sup> David Harvey (1989) argues that the "counter-cultural and anti-modernist movements of the 1960s" that ironically emerged out of modernism, could be seen as a "cultural and political harbinger of the subsequent turn to postmodernism" (p. 38). Like the interpretive intellectual, these anti-modernist thinkers and activists were "antagonistic to the oppressive qualities of scientifically grounded technical-bureaucratic rationality as purveyed through monolithic corporate, state and other forms of institutionalised power ... [celebrating instead] a distinctive 'new left' politics [that was characterised by] the embrace of anti-authoritarian gestures, iconoclastic habits ... and the critique of everyday life" (p. 38).

rendered the whole project of modernity so problematic. As we have seen the conception of certainty and ambivalence as mutually exclusive opposites is a distinctly modernist one. Like certainty, the notion of ambivalence can be viewed as a kind of powerful fiction that can be used by intellectuals in a variety of politically expedient ways. Ambivalence then is a far from neutral or ‘natural’ concept, rather it carries an ideological significance in so far as it represents the ‘other’ of categorical certainty. If the modern obsession with certainty is only meaningful in its negation and subordination of ambivalence, what can we make of the interpretative turn within the academy where ambivalence is valorised and the search for order put into question? Does such an approach reflect a rejection of modern concerns or does it merely represent a reversal of the chaos/order dichotomy, a reinscription of modern values?

Bauman (1993) argues that postmodernity does not necessarily reflect the end of modernity but rather may be seen to represent “modernity coming of age” (p. 272). What appears to distinguish the postmodern experience from that of modernity is an acute sense of the constructed nature of truth and culture and a concomitant problematisation of intellectual authority. Whether this self-consciousness bestows on the postmodern intellectual some kind of autonomy from legislative political ambitions is another matter. What remains to be seen is whether embracing ambivalence results in an emancipatory politics of difference or whether the interpretive intellectual’s anti-theoretical stance inadvertently provides an “ideological alibi” (Zavarzadeh, 1994, p. 4) for a new phase of capitalism driven by a logic of differentiation.

The following chapters deal with the current crisis of intellectual authority and with the subsequent inquiry into the possibility, meaning and limitations of



‘knowledge’ in a postmodern age. In particular, I focus on the work of Rorty, Clifford and Lather, three pivotal postmodern theorists who are attempting to come to grips with the displacement of the modern intellectual from a “privileged relation to truth and knowledge” (Flax, 1990, p. 190). While these theorists apparently accept this displacement (Rorty (1979), for example, in Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature happily pronounces the death of Philosophy) my interest lies in the ways these interpretive theorists attempt to reclaim some kind of authoritative terrain. While applauding the interpretive intellectual’s rejection of the authoritarianism of western metaphysics, I remind the reader that the postmodern theorists I deal with in this text are by no means “free from a will to power whose effects they trace elsewhere” (Flax, 1990, p. 192). In particular, it is important to keep in mind the fact that the discourse of ambivalence despite its seemingly liberatory intent bears an ambiguous relationship to a radical politics of emancipation. My aim then is to examine whether the interpretive approach to knowledge is able to entirely disentangle itself from the modernist legacy which acts as its starting point. Finally I ask whether the politics of indeterminacy proposed by postmodern theory offers a realisable alternative to the hegemonic discourses of modernity.

## II

### **FROM EPISTEMOLOGY TO HERMENEUTICS : DETHEORISING KNOWLEDGE**

In the previous chapter I argued that intellectuals are currently experiencing a crisis of authority due in part to a loss of faith in the foundational myths of Western culture. Given this general crisis there has been much debate over the role that the intellectual might play in a postmodern society. Richard Rorty, the pragmatist philosopher, has been an important voice in this conversation about intellectual authority. He argues that the traditional notion of the philosopher as a natural guardian of truth and rationality is now an outmoded and questionable ideal. Rorty posits that the meta-narratives of certainty and rationality that once governed modern society and legitimised the legislative role of the intellectual have been placed in question. I would argue that, like Bauman, Rorty is suggesting that we are witnessing a general trend away from legislative approaches to reason to an interpretive model of knowledge.

For intellectuals to regain some degree of relevancy in contemporary society, Rorty argues that we must abandon the modern epistemologically-centred approach to knowledge and replace it with a more democratic, utilitarian model of knowledge. His work on philosophical pragmatism constitutes an important contribution to this trend towards an alternative model of knowledge. Like Bauman, Rorty (1979) is critical of the modern conception of culture, viewing the modern quest for order and certainty as a “desire for constraint” (p. 315). Instead, Rorty offers “the notion of culture as a conversation rather than a structure erected on foundations” (p. 319). Rorty’s conversational or hermeneutic model of knowledge and culture draws upon pragmatism and textualism in a self-conscious rejection of modern cultural values and ideals. Accordingly, Rorty hopes to displace these culturally dominant, modern ‘metanarratives’ with an approach to knowledge that legitimises, rather than legislates against, cultural pluralism and diversity. Thus, in Rorty’s post-

Philosophical culture, he sees the role of the intellectual shifting from that of a legislator, upholding universal Western values, to that of an interpreter, liaising between cultural groups in order to encourage ‘edifying conversation’.

In this chapter I will map out Rorty’s critique of traditional legislative approaches to knowledge and his discussion of pragmatism and textualism as ‘interpretive’ alternatives to traditional, epistemologically-based philosophy. This will involve an examination of Rorty’s conception of knowledge as ‘edifying conversation’ and the role that the intellectual might have in relation to this anti-legislative approach to knowledge. While there is no doubt that Rorty’s philosophical writings represent a radical departure from traditional approaches to knowledge, the question remains as to whether an interpretive approach to knowledge translates into an equally radical and emancipatory politics. The chapter concludes, then, with a discussion of Rorty’s conversational model of knowledge in relation to his liberal democratic political agenda. I examine what I see as Rorty’s essentially conservative politics as a means of raising some concerns about the role of Bauman’s interpretive intellectual vis à vis the process of social change.

### **Philosophy and the Quest for Certainty**

To a large extent, Rorty’s work represents a reaction against the dominance of what he calls ‘foundationalist’ discourses in Western culture. Rorty sees these legislative discourses as impeding rather than encouraging freedom of thought and the possibilities of reasoned dialogue. In the philosophical arena, Rorty is critical of the kind of instrumental reason underpinning mainstream philosophy, where mainstream philosophy sees itself as a ‘science’ of knowledge qualified to dictate

and police the objectivity and legitimacy of the truth claims of other discourses. Rorty aims to demystify philosophy and its accompanying myths of universal truth and reason by placing Western metaphysics in a cultural and historical context.

According to Rorty, the development of what he refers to as Philosophy with a capital p, that is that brand of philosophy that sees itself as providing a sure foundation for all knowledge, is a relatively recent event. He argues that the paradigm of *knowing* didn't become a privileged area of human activity in Western culture until "Descartes' conception of knowing [which was defined in terms of] having correct representations in an internal space, the mind" (Rabinow, 1986, p. 235) became the dominant philosophical discourse. Following Descartes, knowledge became synonymous with accurate representation. However, it wasn't until Kant legitimised the Cartesian claim that we only have certainty about ideas that it was possible for an epistemologically-based philosophy to be seen as a foundational science grounding all claims to knowledge.

For Rorty (1979), Kant is a pivotal figure in the development of a separate theory of knowledge whereby philosophers were finally seen to be "presiding over a tribunal of pure reason" (p. 139) and therefore able to judge the validity of the truth claims of other disciplines. Kant transformed the role of philosophy from dealing with transcendental, metaphysical concerns to that of a "foundational discipline" (p. 132). The story of post-kantian, modern philosophy thus revolves around a concern with epistemology; that is, "the equation of knowledge with internal representations and the correct evaluations of those representations" (Rabinow, 1986, p. 234).

Rorty's description of the development of modern philosophy echoes Bauman's portrayal of the birth of modern culture in that they are both stories about a struggle

over the determination and control of knowledge and the subsequent eradication of pluralism. For Rorty (1979), the canonisation of Philosophy, with its focus on theories of knowledge, represents “the triumph of the quest for certainty over the quest for reason” (p. 161). Rorty sees the desire for totalising theories of knowledge as representing a need for order and hierarchy rather than a desire for knowledge. The central focus on epistemology reflects a concern with “the clarification and judgment of the subject’s representations” (Rabinow, 1986, p. 235), which, in turn, leads to a preoccupation with the legislation and policing of the boundaries of ‘knowledge’ and ‘non-knowledge’.

Rorty (1979), however, wishes to topple the modern philosopher from his/her privileged position as arbiter of Truth by placing into question the modern concept of knowledge as accurate representation (p. 318). For Rorty, such an ideal relies on privileging certain kinds of representation as ‘foundational’. By presupposing a universal set of terms within which all knowledge is commensurable the process of rational inquiry is reduced from the outset to an inevitably tautological search for order. The notion that all knowledge is commensurable relies on a Kantian ideal of truth and consensus. Such an ideal presupposes that all discourses will, in the end, lead us to a final truth or fundamental vocabulary underpinning all knowledge. Thus the desire for commensurability (that is, the eradication of ambivalence) is linked to the modern quest for certainty; a quest that Rorty condemns as authoritarian and legislative in intent.

In order to move away from this obsession with discovering a “permanent framework for inquiry” (p. 380) it seems we must set aside the notion that knowledge is about accurately ‘mirroring’ the external world. As Rorty takes great pains to illustrate, the implicit faith in “a permanent, ahistorical, commensurating

vocabulary” (p. 392) that underlies epistemologically-based philosophy is more an “historical accident” (p. 391) than a reflection of some fundamental structure underlying human thought. For Bauman, of course, the centrality of foundationalist Philosophy in the history of modern intellectualism is by no means accidental but, instead, reflects the ideological and legislative needs of the evolving nation state. From a ‘pragmatic’ point of view, Rorty’s point here is that Philosophy’s dominance as a cultural discourse has nothing to do with it being a ‘truer’ or more rational approach to knowledge than other philosophical discourses. Indeed, Rorty perceives Philosophy’s reliance on epistemology and method as impeding rather than facilitating rational thought (p. 318).

### **Pragmatism and Hermeneutics: Against Certainty**

For Rorty, then, it is time for us to discard such an outdated and flawed foundationalist conception of knowledge. His suggestion is that we need to move beyond representational models of knowledge to a more hermeneutic approach to philosophy. Rorty’s hermeneutic model of knowledge draws heavily from pragmatist philosophy, although, as I will show later, his work is also influenced by ‘Continental’ theorists such as Jacques Derrida. Like Continental philosophy, pragmatism has been a marginalised voice within traditional Philosophy. However, with the general trend away from legislative reason, philosophical counter-movements like pragmatism are now taking on a more dominant role in discussions about the nature of knowledge and intellectualism.

Pragmatism was founded by William James and John Dewey, two American philosophers who were deeply critical of the attempt to turn philosophy into a

foundational discipline. Their work entails a reaction against the Kantian assumption that philosophy can provide us with an “all-embracing ahistorical context” (Rorty, 1982, p. 161) via a theory of truth or knowledge. They argue that the desire for a theory of truth implies that truth has some essence and the desire for a founding truth implies that there are specific ways to discover truth.

As Rorty points out, there has been much debate as to the nature of Truth within the ranks of traditional philosophy. This debate essentially falls into two camps. One side is represented by the transcendental philosophers who perceive of truth as something existing on a higher plane transcending mundane human reality. The other side consists of the positivists who hold a correspondence view of reality whereby Truth can be discovered in the natural world using the tools of reason and rationality. According to Rorty, pragmatists are often accused of being positivists because of their anti-Platonist (or anti-idealist) stance. While the pragmatist shares with the positivist the belief that knowledge is “a tool for coping with reality” (p. xvii), the pragmatist rejects the notion that truth corresponds with, or mirrors, reality. In terms of science, then, the positivist insists that science aids us in dealing with reality because scientific truth corresponds with the natural world. In contrast, the pragmatist argues that science merely enables us to cope.

As a pragmatist, Rorty is critical of Philosophy’s assertion that something called the ‘scientific method’ has enabled scientists to have privileged access to the real. The success of science, Rorty argues, has little to do with the application of a rational and objective method. He suggests that scientific ‘discoveries’ are useful because they work in a particular context, using a particular vocabulary- not because they reflect the presence of an external, objective reality.



Thus, for the pragmatist the idea of a theory of truth is philosophically uninteresting and moreover not particularly useful. They believe that theories of knowledge that specify the boundaries between good and bad knowledge, truth and falsity in terms of general, normative laws ironically make it more difficult to say something true or to think rationally. If philosophers frame their questions about the world in terms of foundational notions of truth and reason then the answers they ‘discover’ will inevitably be cast in the same mould. For the pragmatist such an approach to knowledge involves spending too much time obeying epistemological rules rather than doing critical research.

In contrast to the Kantian approach to knowledge, the pragmatist sees the process of reasoning, ideally, as an open conversation between competing and often contradictory discourses rather than as an epistemologically-grounded monologue. The notion that we can reduce the process of rationality to a set of rules or a fixed method is anathema to the pragmatist who views inquiry as “deliberation concerning the relative attractions of various concrete alternatives” (p. 164). The pragmatist denies that there is one correct way of conducting a course of inquiry. Rorty thus sums up pragmatism as a doctrine that posits “that there are no constraints on inquiry save conversational ones” (p. 165). While the “anti-pragmatists follow Plato in striving for an escape from conversation to something atemporal which lies in the background of all possible conversations” (p. 174), according to pragmatism, there are no extra-human structures of truth ‘out there’ guiding our modes of inquiry. The fundamental difference between Philosophy and pragmatism then is the latter’s acceptance of the *contingency* of knowledge.

### **Pragmatism, Textualism and the Contingency of Knowledge**

As previously stated, Rorty's philosophical interests lie more with the counter-tradition in philosophy associated with the work of pragmatists like Dewey, as well as the Continental theorists, than with the mainstream writings of foundationalist philosophers like Kant. The 'heretical' writings of these anti-foundationalist philosophers produced not only the pragmatic trend within philosophy but also influenced the more linguistically centred work of textualist philosophers like Paul De Man and Derrida. Rorty (1991) has recently suggested that he sees Western culture becoming increasingly "poeticised" as it moves away from "scientism" (p. 110). Such a comment reveals Rorty's leanings towards literary approaches to knowledge which he perceives as less constrained by methodology and objectivity than other disciplines. While he is critical of what he sees as the tendency for textualism to degenerate into an epistemology of language, he sees the goals of pragmatism and textualism as being aligned in many ways. Like the textualists, Rorty seeks to align philosophy with the interpretive activities of the literary realm rather than the traditional legislative mode associated with Philosophy. Through emphasising the 'writerly' or constructed nature of all discourses, textualism, like pragmatism, is concerned to point out the contingency of knowledge.

According to Rorty, textualism is concerned with displacing science from its position of dominance. Here science is defined as the sort of activity concerned with rigorous argument where the bounds of debate are preset and the goal is consensus. For the textualist, science represents a foundationalist discourse that attempts to displace the contingency of all meaning with a rhetoric of certainty. Thus, scientific objectivity represents "mere conformity to rule" (Rorty, 1982, p. 143) rather than a means of accessing truth. Instead of depending on "the comforts

and textualists alike see this desire to escape the conventionality and contingency of language as a central flaw within Philosophical thinking.

It seems then that the anti-foundationalist critiques of pragmatist and textualist philosophers intersect at a number of theoretical points. Indeed, Rorty argues that the work of pragmatists like Dewey anticipated many of the concerns of Continental philosophy. Furthermore, Rorty asserts that the trajectory of the work of theorists like Foucault and Deleuze was heading in a pragmatic direction. Whether Rorty's claims about the ascendancy of pragmatism are valid or not, it is clear that the current interest in pragmatism and continental theory supports the existence of a larger linguistic or interpretive 'turn' gaining influence across the humanities. Rorty's work captures the most radical anti-foundationalist aspects of both pragmatism and textualism, and thereby represents the leading edge of this anti-legislative, anti-theoretical 'movement'.

### **From the Universal to the Local: The Philosopher as Cultural Interpreter**

Given that Rorty's pragmatic, linguistically-based critique of epistemologically-centred discourses places into question the role and authority of the modern intellectual, a number of questions emerge. In a discussion about the debate between pragmatism and intuitive realism, Rorty (1982) concludes that "the issue is one about whether philosophy should try to find natural starting-points which are distinct from cultural traditions, or whether all philosophy should do is compare and contrast cultural traditions" (p. xxxvii). This central problematic captures particularly well the issues that have been highlighted in this recent debate about the intellectual's role in contemporary society. In terms of Bauman's thesis, Rorty's

intellectual is faced with choosing between a legislative versus an interpretive approach to knowledge. As a legislative intellectual, the intuitive realist believes there is a Philosophical truth beyond textuality, a foundational knowledge “to which various texts are trying to be ‘adequate’” (p. xxxvii). This belief in an extra-cultural blueprint of knowledge is closely linked with the modern quest for certainty. The realist acquires knowledge in a progressive fashion, striving to piece together, in a jigsaw-like fashion, the fragments of this blueprint. The goal is to bring order and certainty to the philosophical process so that the Philosopher can confidently judge the adequacy of various forms of knowledge. Thus, the legislative intellectual or philosopher is reliant on a universalistic theory of knowledge that can found all truth claims.

However, as we have seen, textualists and pragmatists alike have pronounced the death of Philosophy as a foundational science. The Philosopher can no longer claim to have a privileged, neutral or objective view of a reality existing outside language and culture. In Rorty’s post-Philosophical culture, the philosopher still has tenure but not as an omniscient guardian of truth or social justice. For philosophy to reclaim some kind of cultural authority or relevance it must, suggests the textually-influenced Rorty, self-consciously align itself with literary rather than scientific discourses, a move which involves exchanging the legislative vocabulary of Truth and Reason for the language of interpretation. In emphasising the role of the philosopher as that of an interpreter rather than a legislator, the intellectual is free to abandon pretences to objectivity and can instead treat philosophical discourse “as sharing a narrative and anecdotal style with the novelist and the journalist” (p. 203).

For Rorty, the scientific obsession with objectivity stems from the modern intellectual’s desire that the world “be guided, constrained, not left to its own

devices” (p. xxxix). The pragmatist wants to free the intellectual from this pursuit of certainty and from the legislative role that accompanies it. Thus, Rorty’s interpretive intellectual is concerned less with determining the boundaries of what constitutes ‘good’ knowledge than with liaising between different vocabularies and cultures. The post-Philosophical intellectual becomes a cultural commentator, analysing the various modes of thought of our time, referring to “sets of descriptions, symbol systems, ways of seeing” (p. xl), rather than to some ahistorical, extra-cultural standards.

### **Conversation and Community: Cultural Dialogue and the Production of Meaning**

As Rorty (1979) points out, the interpretive intellectual needs to move beyond the constraints of epistemology and method if s/he is to offer an alternative to the current preoccupation with systematising and objectifying knowledge (p. 315). The question then becomes what happens to status of intellectual inquiry once we have moved ‘beyond representation’? It would seem that given the apparent demystification and deauthorisation of the role of the modern intellectual in society, the process of knowledge production in an apparently postmodern era takes on a whole new meaning. Rorty suggests that for the new interpretive intellectual the utility of knowledge can no longer be judged in relation to some external, non-human reality but instead should be viewed in terms of its contribution to the community. The role of the postmodern intellectual would then revolve around strengthening the sense of community rather than imposing some arbitrary transcultural set of values onto the community.

Rorty (1991) points out that it is partly a fear of parochialism that has driven the desire for objectivity (p. 21). Modern intellectualism involves actively estranging or alienating oneself from one's community in order to transcend the contingency of everyday existence. However, once we realise that there are no metaphysical truths grounding intellectual inquiry, Rorty suggests that, rather than trying to escape the perceived limitations of one's community, we must turn to the possibilities of the social group for guidance. The focus of knowledge production would then shift from a concern with mapping the "relation between human beings and the objects of their inquiry [to a hermeneutic focus on] the (historical) relation between alternative standards of justification" (Rorty, 1979, p. 389). In this relational view of knowledge(s) there is no meta-discourse that one can turn to in order to guarantee the truth or falsity of an argument; rather, there are multiple discourses each of which represents a strand "in a possible conversation" (p. 318).

In short, Rorty (1982) is suggesting we shift the emphasis in knowledge production from a desire for objectivity to a Deweyan concern with the relations between knowledge and "human solidarity" (p. 204). Rorty sees the modern concern with cultural and epistemological order as legislating against the pluralist possibilities of the community. As his critiques of legislative reason have demonstrated, Philosophy tends to eradicate the possibility of multiple discourses in its search for a final vocabulary. In contrast, Rorty perceives an interpretive approach to knowledge as enabling a diversity of sub-cultures to co-exist. Rorty's dialogic or conversational model, in portraying knowledge formation as a shifting and contested *intersubjective* process, opens up the possibility of multiple knowledges or truths. Such a model legitimises rather than marginalises difference.

The recognition that knowledge formation is a discursive rather than an objective process and is embedded in social practices leads Rorty (1979) to posit that the goal of thinking should become “education” rather than “knowledge” and that such “edifying” approaches to philosophy should revolve around “the way things are said [rather than] the possession of truths” (p. 359). Here there is no privileged mode of speech that will lead to a conversational consensus but instead “a potential infinity of vocabularies” (p. 367) all of which represent different ways of describing the world. When knowledge is viewed in terms of ‘edifying’ conversation rather than the acquisition of Truth, the focus moves beyond an objective structured reality to an examination of the role of the social subject in the production of meaning.

### **The Politics of Pluralism: Radical Philosophy Meets American Liberalism**

This conversational approach to philosophy where knowledge is *performed*<sup>1</sup> rather than ‘discovered’, anticipates the dialogic approach to ethnography and sociological research advocated by Clifford and Lather in the following chapters. The dialogic model represents more than a concern with developing new approaches to knowledge. It also reflects some attempt to redress the perceived authoritarianism and imperialism associated with traditional representational forms. Underpinning these theorists conceptualisation of knowledge as produced through

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<sup>1</sup> The postmodern focus on the performative nature of knowledge involves foregrounding the theatrical and rhetorical aspects of meaning construction in order to problematise conventional referential models of language. According to this performative model, meaning is constructed within a particular *dramatic* context rather than corresponding to some external symbolic structure. As Zavarzadeh (1994) states, “what is at stake here is not knowledge as content but knowledge as *relation* [my emphasis]” (p. 44). Thus, the postmodern performativist is concerned with displacing a dialectics of knowledge with a relational, dialogic approach that sees knowledge as produced in an intersubjective rather than an objective manner.

open, communal conversation lies an apparent concern with the politics of difference. In the first chapter I raised some concerns regarding the relationship between the interpretive intellectual and the radical, emancipatory goals associated with the politics of difference. The question that remains then is what sort of political system might accompany a conversational or dialogic approach to knowledge?

For Rorty (1991), pragmatism represents “a philosophy tailored to the needs of political liberalism” (p. 211) rather than radicalism. He views the democratic, capitalist society as the most likely political environment to encourage cultural pluralism and diversity. Non-democratic societies that attempt to reach consensus through legislation diminish the possibilities for a diversity of doctrines and beliefs. According to Rorty, pluralism is achieved by encouraging a kind of politics of the local rather than imposing an external set of moral codes. Communities must determine their own laws and policies according to contingent, utilitarian needs. The demise of universalist myths about truth and justice means that, for example, the question of human rights can no longer be viewed in some ahistorical, universalist fashion but instead becomes “relatively local and ethnocentric [that is, determined by] the tradition of a particular community, the consensus of a particular culture” (p. 176).

In such an ‘ethnocentric’ environment, the transcultural, ahistorical modern self is replaced with an identity constituted by community; that is a local and historical self. For Rorty, this historicised notion of the self and social justice is best suited to a liberal democracy where that polity allows for what Rorty, quoting Rawls, summarises as a “diversity of doctrines and [a] plurality of conflicting, and indeed incommensurable conceptions of [political justice]” (p. 179). In Rorty’s pragmatic



ideal of a democracy centrally concerned with justice, where “social policy needs no more authority than successful accommodation among individuals, individuals who find themselves heir to the same historical traditions and faced with the same problems” (p. 184), universalist concerns about the meaning of human existence will be detached from politics and reserved for private life. Thus, Rorty wishes to defend liberal institutions while discarding the kind of Kantian idealism that traditionally underpins a liberal democratic society. Calling himself, albeit in a tongue in cheek fashion, a postmodernist liberal, Rorty rejects modern metanarratives while preserving the liberal ideals and institutions which he sees as essential to a politics of cultural pluralism (p. 209).

Rorty’s pluralist politics, then, is underpinned by a concern for community values and human solidarity. In Rorty’s democratic community each individual is theoretically able to hold any political, moral or religious belief no matter how extreme as long as these beliefs do not interfere with the integrated functioning of the community. While Rorty denounces the politics of consensus as a foundationalist ideal, his conversational approach to knowledge and politics relies on the notion that diverse discourses and cultures are not completely incommensurable or untranslatable but that all cultures share some beliefs and goals and are therefore able to communicate freely and meaningfully. When Lyotard suggests that there are times in political conversation when free and open communication cannot occur because one of the parties involved may be “deprived of the means of arguing” (cited in Rorty, 1991, p. 216), Rorty accuses Lyotard of being unable to step outside the boundaries of a legislative mode of reasoning (p. 217). Essentially, Rorty believes that we can move from a legislative to a purely interpretive approach to knowledge, reason and politics by switching our vocabularies from a judicial to a consensual (in the dialogic sense) language.

Communication, then, is not about the mastery of rules but instead depends on ones “ability to get along with other players of a language-game, a game played without referees” (p. 217).

Rorty’s politics of difference thus relies on the notion that knowledge can be separated from the will to power and put to the service of human solidarity. It seems that if his ideal of the possibility of cultural dialogue occurring unfettered by power or politics were a feasible one then a liberal democratic polity might prove the most appropriate setting for such a model. However, just as Rorty would argue that knowledge production cannot occur in some extra-cultural, ahistorical vacuum, I would suggest that the notion that cultural dialogue can be extracted from the network of social and power relations in which all such interactions occur, is a problematic one. Furthermore, there are a number of questions that such a conception of dialogue raises about Rorty’s political intentions. Can Rorty’s ideal of human solidarity coexist with a genuine concern for a politics of difference or does the notion of communicational ‘consensus’ merely encourage cultural homogeneity? Who would define the boundaries of Rorty’s local, pragmatically-based community and at what point would such a definition become legislative in intent?

The reformist politics to which Rorty adheres must give the radical intellectual some cause for concern with regard to the anti-legislative claims of the interpretive turn. As Steven Watts (1991) points out, recent appeals to ‘community’ and cultural pluralism by the poststructuralist Left have resulted largely in the “reproduction and intensification of uncritical, liberal pluralism [leaving intact the] fundamental structures of modern liberal culture” (p. 652-653). It would seem that Rorty’s refusal to engage in discussions about knowledge and power, despite being posited

as an attempt to avoid using a legislative vocabulary, paradoxically prevents those marginalised groups that Rorty sets out to empower from entering into his pragmatic conversations. The tendency to ignore issues of power when focusing on the politics of interpretation results in effacing, rather than deconstructing, the very real structural constraints that diminish the possibility of cultural pluralism. In the concluding chapter of this thesis I expand on this critique of Rorty's conversational model of knowledge and politics in order to underscore the problematic nature of his pluralist politics vis à vis a radical politics of difference.

Having examined the radical possibilities of Rorty's (anti-)theories about knowledge, we have witnessed the difficulties encountered in Rorty's attempts to translate this radical promise into political reality. While also a proponent of the dialogic approach to knowledge, James Clifford, whose critical work on ethnographic authority I address in the next chapter, is much more attuned to issues of power and knowledge than Rorty. In this sense Clifford's work seems to be more aligned with a Foucaultian approach to knowledge than with the kind of Deweyan, idealistic, philosophy of knowledge-without-power associated with Rorty's pragmatism. The political possibilities of Clifford's work, where his interpretive approach to knowledge is tempered by a power analysis, seem more promising than Rorty's rather naive pragmatism. The question remains, then, as to whether the interpretive intellectual, representing a conversational politics, can offer anything more than a reformist apology for liberalism.

### **III**

## **TEXTUALISING CULTURE : ETHNOGRAPHY'S ENCOUNTER WITH LITERARY THEORY**

Like the Philosopher, the ethnographer has recently been forced to come to grips with the general questioning of intellectual authority. As a discipline that has been concerned with representing the 'other', ethnography stands out as one of the more transparently power-laden discourses in the Academy. Not surprisingly, the modern ethnographer has often found him/herself having to defend the role and authority of the ethnographer. Up until now, the ethnographer has been able to respond to accusations of cultural imperialism by relying on scientific rationalism as a discourse of legitimation. As I have shown, however, the notion that the scientific method can guarantee the researcher any kind of cultural neutrality has been questioned from a number of sources. Furthermore, in an era of postcolonialism, where Western unitary categories like 'culture', 'identity' and 'ethnicity' have been problematised, it would seem that "the activity of cross cultural representation is now more than usually in question" (Clifford, 1983, p. 118).

As discussed in the previous chapter, the foundational discourses underpinning traditional notions of representation are gradually being undermined, not only in the realm of philosophy, but across the humanities. Up until recently, anthropology as a discipline has been rather slow to respond to the challenge offered up by "deconstructionist literary criticism" (Rabinow, 1986, p. 242). However, the emergence of 'meta-theorists' like James Clifford, a prominent anthropologist who is situated at the leading edge of critical debates regarding the general crisis of representation and the loss of disciplinary authority within ethnography, appears to signal ethnography's 'coming of age' in terms of critical theory.

Clifford, like Rorty in his criticism of Philosophy, draws heavily on literary theory or textualism to support his critical claims in his examination of the crisis of legitimation currently sweeping ethnography. As a textualist, Clifford is centrally concerned with making visible the literary aspect of ethnography, a dimension that has hitherto been marginalised or hidden within the research process. This is not to suggest that anthropologists have previously been completely unaware of issues relating to the narrativisation of social experience and the textually ‘constructed’ nature of culture. For example, since the publication of his groundbreaking and controversial work on the Balinese cockfight, Clifford Geertz has worked to blur the boundaries between anthropological and literary concerns. Most recently Biersack (1989) argues Geertz has contributed to and taken part in the major literary turn in anthropology, a turn which has witnessed a “shift in focus from culture-as-text...to anthropological texts...and their rhetorical strategies” (p. 73).

Rabinow (1986), however, draws a clear distinction between Geertz’s “interpretive anthropology” which he sees as still primarily concerned with reinventing “anthropological science” using better textual strategies and Clifford’s “textualist meta-anthropology” (p. 242-243). While Geertz’s focus remains on the “social description of the other” (p. 242), Clifford seems to have become anthropology’s postmodernist meta-scribe with his ‘object’ of study being that of ethnographic representation itself. Thus, Clifford is concerned with ‘exoticising’ anthropological culture and its epistemological traditions; or, as Rabinow puts it, with othering “the anthropological representation of the other” (p. 242).

In his focus on ethnography, Clifford is sceptical of the discipline’s claims to a neutral representation of cultural groups. By foregrounding the processes of textual

production and the rhetorical strategies at work in the ethnographic text, Clifford (1986a) aims to reveal the “constructed, artificial nature of cultural accounts” (p. 2). He is centrally concerned, then, with denaturalising and demystifying the authority of the ethnographer. In the process of deconstructing the ethnographer’s claim to authority, he analyses the rhetorical strategies employed by the modern ethnographer in order to ‘authorise’ the text. Clifford is critical of the use of realist styles in ethnography in so far as the realist ethnographer tends to conceal the fabricated nature of ethnographic accounts. By showing that the ethnographer’s authority derives from specific, historically situated textual strategies, Clifford aims to open up the ethnographic space to the possibilities of new textual forms; anti-realist strategies that appear to offer radical possibilities not just for anthropology but for the humanities in general.

Clifford does not see textualism as merely offering ethnography the possibility of better modes of representation. Instead, he sees a new textualist ethnography as providing a critical arena where social description is problematised. Like Rorty’s Philosopher, Clifford’s traditional ethnographer is no longer able to justify sole claim to a privileged set of tools for cultural analysis. In an age of post-colonialism, ethnography’s traditional concern with capturing the essence of the ‘other’ seems increasingly anachronistic. At the same time, the ethnographer has access to privileged insights, insights gained from being positioned “between powerful systems of meaning” (p. 2). For this reason, ethnography can still provide an important and authoritative contribution to any discussion about knowledge and power. Clifford views ethnography as occupying a space on “the boundaries of civilisations, classes, races and genders” (p. 2). Positioned as it is on these boundaries, ethnography is at the centre of debates about the politics and

problematics of translation. It is, or could be, according to Clifford, “an emergent interdisciplinary phenomenon” (p. 3).

### **Legislating Knowledge: The Scientisation of Ethnography**

For Clifford (1988), the doubts that are increasingly being raised in relation to the validity and ethics of ‘translating’ the life worlds of culturally exotic ‘others’ into Western scientific discourse are “symptoms of a pervasive postcolonial crisis of ethnographic authority” (p. 8). Much of his work on the literary aspects of ethnographic processes emerges out of this wider challenge within the humanities towards the notion that the “West” has the “authority to represent [a] unified human history” (p. 13). Clifford’s (1986a) work marks a general awareness that the ethnographer can no longer suppress the literary aspect of ethnography through recourse to the “transparency of representation and immediacy of experience” (p. 2).

While a number of prominent ethnographers, including Malinowski, Clifford Geertz, Mary Douglas and Levi-Strauss to name a few, have admitted to being influenced by the literary realm, Clifford asserts that up until recently literary influences have been marginalised and suppressed within an ethnographic discipline which sees itself as being rigorously scientific (p. 3). Since the seventeenth century, he argues, Western science, in constructing itself as factual and objective, has actively sought to exclude literary forms of knowledge from the scientific arena. Fiction, representing an unstable, polysemous discourse was deemed the epistemological antithesis of a scientific knowledge predicated on the univocality of Truth and Reason.



In his mapping out of the processes whereby ethnography became characterised as a 'science' in the twentieth century, Clifford argues that this was partly due to a calculated suppression of the fictionalising processes inherent in ethnographic work and a subsequent alignment with the perceived monologic authority of rationalism. From 1900 to 1960, the process of ethnography became professionalised with "intensive fieldwork, pursued by university trained specialists, [emerging] as a privileged, sanctioned source of data about exotic peoples" (Clifford, 1983, p. 120). Prior to this the ethnographer could not claim any particular authority over the process of cultural interpretation. There was nothing to guarantee the legitimacy of the ethnographer's interpretation over that of the traveller or missionary. However, with the gradual emergence of the fieldworker as a professional whose authority was "both scientifically validated and based on a unique personal experience" (p. 121), the work of amateurs in the field was subordinated to that of the new fieldworker.

Prior to the late nineteenth century Clifford argues that the boundary between the ethnographer and the anthropologist was able to be kept quite distinct. However, the emergence of the professional ethnographic fieldworker witnessed a blurring of the roles of interpreter/translator versus anthropologist/scientist. For example, the work of the famous ethnographer Malinowski demonstrates a constant anxiety vis à vis "the rhetorical problem of convincing his readers that the facts he was putting before them were objectively acquired, not subjective creations" (p. 123). While ethnography may have sought to align itself with scientific rationalism, the dominant cultural discourse of the time, the interpretive or literary aspects of the ethnographic process were still very much in evidence. Ethnography became at once a scientific

and literary genre, “a synthetic cultural description based on participant-observation” (p. 124).

Given the obvious tensions between promoting ethnography as a science while attempting to conceal the literary or ‘subjective’ processes involved in cultural description, it was necessary to construct and legitimise certain institutional and methodological practices in order to validate an ethnography based on scientific participant-observation. This included validating “the persona of the fieldworker [as a scientific expert with access to] the latest analytic techniques and modes of scientific explanation” (p. 124). Like Rorty’s Philosopher, the professional fieldworker was, according to Clifford, promoted as having privileged access to an objective, scientific realm that enabled him/her to “get to the heart of a culture more quickly, grasping its essential institutions and structures” (p. 124). Out of this ‘scientisation’ of ethnography emerged a privileged set of normative standards governing and policing the bounds of valid scientific research in a systematised fashion.

According to Clifford, in order to further legitimise the authority of the ethnographer the academy placed increasing importance on “the power of observation” (p. 125). This was accompanied, he argues, by the institutionalisation of an objectified, static notion of culture “as an ensemble of characteristic behaviours, ceremonies and gestures, susceptible to recording and explanation by a trained onlooker” (p. 125). The primacy allocated to *visualism* validated the role of the ethnographer as a distanced, detached observer able to accurately map the objective structures of a culture. Utilising reason as a legislative tool, the inter-

subjective, interpretive processes of ethnography were effectively suppressed within an empirical ethnographic model that privileged ‘objective’ forms of knowledge.

These legitimating strategies came together in the body of the ethnographic text itself where certain textual or rhetorical modes were employed to denote the objective, scientific nature of the ethnographer’s claims. In particular, textual realism, a representational mode that tends to conceal its own ‘constructed’ nature, served the purposes of a modern ethnography concerned with privileging the authority of scientific discourse.

### **From Rationalism to Hermeneutics: The Shifting Ground of Ethnographic Authority**

The participant-observation model privileged in ethnography can be seen as paradoxically representing a kind of epistemological dialectic of experience versus interpretation where the emphasis on either term depends on the type of authoritative claim being made. The traditional scientific mode around which ethnography constructed its authority depended on privileging the *experience* of the ethnographer. While the notion of experience suggests non-scientific, subjective processes that appear to contradict the concept of participant-observation as a science, the traditional ethnographic construction of experience as a “unifying source of authority” (Clifford, 1983, p. 128) depends upon an underlying belief that one can translate the chaotic experiential realm into a stable, coherent representation reflected in the form of a realist text. In this objectivist approach to representation and the acquisition of cultural knowledge, the mystification of the process of

translation further serves to add to the authoritative aura of the ethnographer as fieldworker.

However, like Bauman, Clifford contends that in recent years there has been a shift towards focusing on the interpretive aspects of this dialectic model (p. 127). Clifford posits a general scepticism towards experiential claims to authority. This has been accompanied, he argues, by an attempt to make visible “what had previously passed unexamined in the construction of ethnographic narratives” (p. 130). In contrast to the kind of empirical assumptions underpinning experiential modes of authority, the interpretive anthropologist posits that “a world cannot be apprehended directly” (p. 131) but instead is always already present in a textualised form. Viewing “culture as an assemblage of texts to be interpreted” (p. 130), the interpretive ethnographer aims to demystify the processes of cultural “invention” in which all ethnographers are engaged.

However, Clifford is critical of interpretive anthropologists like Geertz, who, while perceiving culture in textual terms, tend to render invisible the dialogic nature of culture and their own authorial role in suppressing that dialogue (p. 132). While Clifford acknowledges the role that interpretive ethnography has played in problematising ethnographic authority, he argues that it is still dependant largely on realist modes of representation that continue to position the ethnographer as knowing subject while reducing the contribution of the ‘native’ informant to that of cultural object.

Clifford argues that the Geertzian interpretive mode is in the process of being replaced by discursive or dialogic models of ethnographic practice that disrupt the

monologic textual authority of the ethnographer. These latter models of ethnography are centrally concerned with what happens when the discursive research experience is translated “into a textual corpus separate from its discursive occasions of production” (p. 131). Clifford suggests that the translation process involves filtering out “the actuality of discursive situations and individual interlocutors ... [in order to locate] the unruly meanings of a text in a single, coherent intention” (p. 132). However, in a discursive model of knowledge, meaning is seen as being produced intersubjectively, in a specific, communicational setting. According to Clifford, the ethnographer cannot read or interpret culture as an “abstracted, textualised reality” (p. 133) but, instead, is forced to engage in a dialogic process where meaning is shared, constructed and negotiated with one or more ‘informants’. The final ethnographic product is not so much an authorised monologue as a heteroglossic text “shot through with other subjectivities and specific contextual overtones” (p. 133).

Clifford argues that we have recently witnessed the emergence of some concrete examples of this new mode of ethnography, a mode he characterises as a “discursive paradigm of ethnographic writing” (p. 134). In these experimental ethnographic works the writer is concerned with foregrounding the “circumstantial and intersubjective” (p. 134) elements normally suppressed in the process of textual construction. In several of the works Clifford discusses, the text is presented as an actual dialogue in order to reveal the collaborative nature of ethnographic work. As he points out, however, such textual strategies are still no more than “*representations* of dialogue” (p. 134). While the ethnographer may be portrayed as a mere participant in a cultural conversation, such a representation may still leave intact the “monological authority” of the ethnographer (p. 135).

It seems that the dialogic representation of ethnographic work still reduces and simplifies what Clifford sees as the “complex, multi-vocal processes” (p. 135) invoked in any anthropological encounter. For Clifford, a more useful way to problematise the notion of a monologic ethnographic authority is to introduce into the structure of the ethnographic text itself the concept of “research as an ongoing negotiation” (p. 135). This involves rendering transparent those research processes normally hidden in the background of the ethnographic text. He notes that this move is not a completely new one. Paradoxically, prior to the institutionalisation of the “modern, authoritative monograph” (p. 136) as *the* valid form of ethnographic representation, many ethnographic texts were more complex and open to multiple readings than their modern counterparts. Given that the modern, ethnographic mode, with its emphasis on the experiential authority of the ethnographer, was still in its infancy, these early ethnographic texts often revealed themselves to be constructed not only by the ethnographer but also by multiple indigenous “authors” (p. 136). According to this reading, it seems, these texts were prototypical discursive ethnographies. Unlike the modern monograph, they allowed for the possibility of a multivocal rather than a monologically-based authority.

Clifford’s analysis of the changing face of ethnographic authority illustrates the restrictive and repressive nature of privileging particular discourses, in the case of modern ethnography that of scientific rationalism, in the process of constructing intellectual authority. Like Rorty, Clifford sees this tendency to adhere to pre-conceived epistemological frameworks or textual prescriptions as limiting the pluralist possibilities of intellectual inquiry. In Clifford’s new conception of

ethnography the intellectual's authority derives from a commitment to pluralism and cultural dialogue rather than relying upon legislative approaches to knowledge.

### **Ethnography as Conversation: the Dialogic Cultural Text**

Clifford is also sceptical of the ethnographer's ability to represent a postmodern contemporary culture of increasing complexity and diversity. Like Bauman, Clifford (1986b) argues that we have entered a new "postcultural" age characterised by a general "condition of uncertainty" (p. 143). In Clifford's version of postmodernism, he contends that 'reality' has changed fundamentally. While we were once able to refer to stable cultures and identities, our current "urban, multinational world of institutionalised transience" represents a new, postmodern environment where the stable signs of Western culture now appear as "achieved fictions, containing and domesticating heteroglossia" (p. 143). Doubt has been cast, then, on the legitimacy of modern ethnographic practices as the "ambiguous" and "multi-vocal" nature of the contemporary world "makes it increasingly hard to conceive of human diversity as inscribed in bounded, independent cultures" (Clifford, 1983, p. 119).

For Clifford (1986a), traditional approaches to representation provide inadequate interpretive models for a contemporary world that demands "new forms of inventiveness and subtlety from a fully reflexive ethnography" (p. 23). The static notion of culture that has served as an explanatory model for ethnographic research is becoming increasingly obsolete. Instead of adhering to rigid, totalising theories of culture, the indeterminacy of the 'present' calls for a complete revision of modern ethnography. Clifford's postmodern ethnographer is no longer able to refer to the

meta-narratives of certainty that underpin such totalising theories of culture in order to authorise his/her position. Any claims to authority that the postmodern ethnographer might make must acknowledge the limitations and impossibilities of representation. Without recourse to the Cartesian fundamentals of reason and truth, the postmodern ethnographer stands on shifting epistemological ground so that the process of theorising becomes one of responding to the “current, changing situation...(with) interventions rather than positions” (p. 24).

Clifford (1983) is interested in investigating the “new methods and epistemologies” (p. 119) that have emerged from postmodern critiques of traditional approaches to representation and that offer more fluid, shifting conceptions of culture. According to Clifford, a revised ethnographic project must look to the literary arena for new ways to approach the construction of cultural knowledge and identity. However, like Rorty, he is at pains to point out that while such alternative approaches to knowledge may help us construct less static, ahistorical images of each other and of the cultures from which we emerge, “no sovereign scientific method or ethical stance can guarantee the truth of such images” (p. 119).

Nevertheless, Clifford views the textual realm as offering ethnography new, liberatory possibilities in terms of not only interpreting an increasingly complex sociocultural environment but also in relation to allowing the voice of cultural ‘others’ to be given recognition in the ethnographic process. Clifford calls upon Bakhtin’s notion of the polyphonic novel as “a utopian textual space where discursive complexity, the dialogical interplay of voices, can be accommodated” (p. 137) in order to illustrate the alternative textual approaches available to the ethnographer concerned with problematising textual authority.



The predominant and traditional narrative mode in ethnography, Clifford argues, resembles the “free indirect style [associated, for example, with the writing of Flaubert], a style that suppresses direct quotation in favour of a controlling discourse always more-or-less that of the author” (p. 137). In contrast, for Bakhtin the ideal novelist resists the temptation to produce a controlled, coherent text, constructing instead a more multivocal work that “grapples with, and enacts, heteroglossia” (p. 136). While Clifford notes that most ethnographers tend to aspire to the kind of “Flaubertian omniscience” that enables them to view the culture of the other from a distanced, objective position, “beneath the surface their texts are more unruly and discordant”, suggesting the possibility of Bakhtinian polyphony (p. 137). The Bakhtinian ideal of the polyphonic novel is still, for Clifford, limited in its pluralist possibilities given that the novel is always, in the end, constructed by a single author. In contrast, Clifford points out that the process of ethnography is inevitably “invaded by heteroglossia” (p. 139) given that ethnographic discourse claims to represent the experiences of specific real, rather than fictionalised, individuals.

The realisation that the ethnographic text is always multivocal leads Clifford to posit “an alternative textual strategy” where the notion of polyphony is translated into a concrete recognition of the collaborative nature of the text (p. 140). In such a format the status of the informants would move from that of “independent enunciators...to writers” (p. 140). As Clifford admits, such a dream of plural authorship is a utopian one given that the ethnographic process is determined by “the research interest of the ethnographer, who in the end assumes an executive, editorial position [thus inevitably reinscribing] the authoritative stance of ‘giving

voice' to the other" (p. 140). It seems that while we can strive to problematise the ethnographer's authority and offer alternative strategies that encourage dialogic readings of the text, all modes of representation are inevitably caught up in problems of authority. The object must be to foreground rather than attempt to conceal different modes of authority and to admit that the goal of "coherent presentation" is never innocent but instead is always "a matter of strategic choice" (p. 142).

The kind of authorial self-reflexivity that Clifford (1986a) is advocating here depends on accepting that literary practices cannot be extracted from the empirical process and "marked off in an aesthetic, creative or humanising domain" (p. 6). Rather, if ethnographers accept that cultural representations are always partial and exclusionary then the fictionality of ethnographic writing must be emphasised and moreover embraced. This self-reflexive approach is, for Clifford, an important aspect of a revisionist ethnography whose goal is to disperse ethnographic authority. He suggests that by self-consciously utilising the process of textual fabrication to convey to the reader the incomplete and contested nature of ethnographic truth, the ethnographer can use this open admission of partiality as a "source of representational tact" (p. 7). For example, in the collected documents of James Walker's work with the Teton Sioux the documentation has been "edited in a manner that gives equal weight to diverse renditions of tradition [so that] Walker's own descriptions and glosses are fragments among fragments" (p. 15) carrying no particular authorial weight or privilege while the "informants" become, in effect, co-authors.

Clifford thus urges the ethnographer to avoid reducing cultural accounts to a falsely coherent whole. Like the surrealist artist who seeks to defamiliarise

conventional notions of reality rather than rendering the real comprehensible, the ethnographer as fabricator must learn to construct fragmented rather than unified texts. Instead of relying on scientific rhetoric in order to disguise the constructed nature of the ethnographic text, the work should resemble the surrealist collage with “the cuts and sutures of the research process left visible” (Clifford, 1981, p. 563). Clifford’s ethnographer has thus moved away from an explanatory model of representation to a more experimental mode of textual construction where the goal becomes to render visible, rather than to suppress, the ‘otherness’ within the text.

Clifford’s ‘ethnographic surrealism’ resonates with Bauman’s metanarrative that we are moving from an age of certainty to a postmodern era characterised by ambivalence. Clifford’s ethnographer is no longer concerned with fabricating coherent representational models or with imposing a textualised order on to an increasingly complex and ambiguous social world. Instead, the surrealist ethnographer celebrates strangeness, “provoking the irruption of otherness - the unexpected”, thereby problematising and defamiliarising an ethnographic humanism that “begins with the different and renders it (through naming, classifying, describing, interpreting) comprehensible” (p. 562).

### **From Visualism to Performance**

Clifford’s (1986a) generalised critique of the tendency of modern ethnography to legislate against difference emerges in another form in what he summarises as a rejection of “visualism” (p. 11) within ethnography. Clifford contends that the participant-observation model that has provided the methodological basis of

ethnographic work privileges the “truth of vision” over the evidences of other senses such as sound and smell (p. 11). Such a privileging of visual models of reality has led to a tendency to see the anthropologist as observing and thereby objectifying culture from a distanced standpoint. The notion that one can comprehend culture visually implies what is for Clifford, following Foucault (1979), a problematic conception of the process of acquiring cultural knowledge. Utilising the visualist model, the Western scholar perceives cultural knowledge as a set of facts that can be “observed, rather than, for example, heard, invented in dialogue, or transcribed” (Clifford, 1986a, p. 12). Clifford contends that this model “confer[s] on the other a discrete identity, while also providing the knowing observer with a standpoint from which to see without being seen, to read without interruption” (p. 12).

Visualism can thus be seen as an epistemological embodiment of the hierarchical relationship arising between the modern ethnographer and the cultural ‘informant’, where ethnographic authority over the representation of the ‘other’ depends on privileging the Western ethnographic gaze. In order to topple visualism from its privileged position in cultural discourse, Clifford suggests replacing such objectifying models with more discursively aware models that aim to capture “an interplay of voices” (p. 12) rather than reducing culture to a flat, one dimensional text. In constructing texts that move towards the multivocality of dialogue rather than the univocality of the aforementioned visual paradigm, Clifford hopes to legitimate the “*performative* [my emphasis] elements of ethnography” (p. 12).

When knowledge production is viewed in a performative sense “the dominant metaphors for ethnography shift away from the observing eye and toward expressive speech (and gesture)” (p. 12). If cultural knowledge is seen as being generated in

specific speech acts it becomes apparent that ethnographic texts tell the reader less about the cultural 'object' encountered by the ethnographer than they do about the complex interactions and negotiations of meaning occurring between the ethnographer and his/her 'informants'; that is, the 'actors' in the text. The implied separation between the subject and the object, self and other, that underpins the traditional participant-observation model becomes problematised. Instead of viewing the text as a static cultural representation controlled by the ethnographer, Clifford encourages us to see ethnography "as a performance emplotted by powerful stories"(p. 98).

The notion that the ethnographic text is a performative, intercultural arena implies a dispersal of Western ethnographic authority. This emphasis on the interactive process of meaning construction results in "transforming the "cultural text"... into a speaking subject, who sees as well as is seen, who evades, argues, probes back" (p. 14), thus empowering the cultural 'other' normally silenced or marginalised in the ethnographic text. Clifford contends that for the truly 'self-reflexive' ethnographic writer it becomes impossible to construct a coherent narrative from an objective, distanced standpoint. Once the ethnographer recognises his/her own participation in a cultural exchange of knowledge and meaning then inevitably "difference invades the text; it can no longer be represented; it must be *enacted* [my emphasis]" (p. 104).

While Clifford does not advocate any particular textual strategy or model of knowledge as *the* epistemological solution to problems of ethnographic authority, I have chosen to focus on his performative model of knowledge because it illustrates especially well Bauman's theory that the postmodern intellectual is moving towards

anti-legislative forms of knowledge. Clifford's conception of ethnography as a performative, intersubjective process implies a more democratic, anti-disciplinary approach to knowledge. He notes that with the demise of intellectual authority one can no longer justify imperialist attempts to map the 'other' from some privileged, extra-cultural standpoint. He embraces the possibilities offered by this apparent rupture of hierarchies of knowledge advocating a dissolution of the artificial disciplinary boundaries separating ethnography as a profession from the realm of art and literature. For Clifford (1983), then, as we enter a postmodern post-disciplinary age "it has become necessary to imagine a world of generalised ethnography" (p. 119).

### **Writing Ethnography: The Limitations of Textualism**

Clifford's work on ethnographic authority arises out of a more general concern within the humanities about the politics and problematics of representation. As evidenced by the textualist influence apparent in Clifford's writings, ethnography's encounter with literary criticism has contributed in a major way to the current scepticism shown towards ethnography's claims to cultural authority. There is no doubt that this literary 'turn' within ethnography has helped to politicise issues of cross-cultural representation and has encouraged ethnography to turn its gaze upon its own 'culture'. Textualists like Clifford, through dissecting ethnographic texts and revealing textual strategies of domination hidden behind a rhetoric of scientific objectivity, have contributed to undermining the myth of authorial neutrality.

Clifford's work, underpinned as it is by an implicit endorsement of pluralism and difference, represents one version of Bauman's interpretive turn. Clifford is an example of a theorist who has turned towards the text as a way to resolve problems of authority. However, the limitations of textualism for such a project become apparent in some of the literary solutions that Clifford offers. His handling of the issue of partiality illustrates this problematic. While Clifford (1983) contends that the ethnographer can never shed his/her own cultural influences in order to accurately represent another culture, he contradicts this admission of partiality by suggesting that it is possible for the ethnographer utilising a dialogic cultural model to "resist the pull toward authoritative representation of the other" (p. 135). Such a statement suggests the possibility of discovering better representational models, that are able to represent the world more accurately, rather than reflecting a desire to move beyond conventional modes of representation. While the open admission of partiality that characterises the self-reflexive text is a useful strategy in the research setting for making apparent the power-laden nature of socio-cultural inquiry, such an admission does not automatically confer some kind of neutrality on the researcher. Cultural description is always politicised and partial whether one constructs the ethnographic text in a self-reflexive or a realist mode.

Clifford, in being unable to accept the partial and limited nature of *all* knowledge, including that of the textualist ethnographer, offers a problematic solution to Bauman's anti-legislative project. Clifford's tendency to privilege textual analysis over other approaches poses a problem for the interpretive focus advocated by Bauman where the emphasis is on the way that 'life worlds' are constituted in a plural manner. By subsuming the complexities and contradictions of the socio-cultural realm "into a reified, formalist notion of literature (or textuality)"

(Reed, 1992, p. 146), Clifford's work represents a somewhat limited and exclusionary approach to the legislative/interpretive debate.

In making these criticisms I am not suggesting that Clifford is unaware of these issues. Rather, I wish to highlight some of the limitations of looking for literary solutions to problems of authority. There are dangers in privileging literary discourse, not the least of which is the tendency to presume that the text somehow contains an inherent liberatory promise of dialogue unfettered by power relations or difference. While Clifford admittedly points out that the ethnographic text is always constructed within a particular set of institutional, social and power relations, like many textualists he tends to conflate issues of authorial control within the text with wider issues of disciplinary and cultural authority. I will return to some of these issues in my next chapter when I discuss Patti Lather's attempt to use a performative model of knowledge in order to construct research strategies that empower the 'informant'. While Lather moves beyond the purely theoretical writings of Rorty and Clifford in striving to apply interpretive approaches to knowledge to actual empirical work, I show that her 'post-positivist' claims are rather premature and again offer a rather problematic resolution to Bauman's legislative crisis.



## IV

### **DEMOCRATISING KNOWLEDGE : EMPIRICISM IN A POSTPOSITIVIST ERA**

Like Rorty and Clifford, the work of Patti Lather, a feminist theorist in education, can be seen as arising out of and contributing to the ‘interpretive’ turn I have been mapping out in this thesis. Lather’s focus on developing empowering research methodologies and her concern with research as praxis reflects a critical stance towards positivist claims to objectivity and neutrality. While her explicitly feminist-socialist political agenda seems to have little in common with Rorty’s pragmatic affirmation of bourgeois liberalism, she shares with both Rorty and Clifford a scepticism towards grand theories of knowledge which legislate the conditions under which knowledge is generated and validated. Like Bauman, Lather (1988) posits that we are moving from an era of certainty characterised by a “lust for absolutes” (p. 570) to a postpositivist era “premised on the essential indeterminacy of human experiencing” (p. 569). She asserts that there is an increasing awareness of the obsolescence of positivism as “the orthodox paradigm for inquiry in the human sciences” (1986a, p. 63).

This growing awareness of the limitations of positivism has resulted, Lather claims, in “a rich ferment in contemporary discourse regarding empirical research in the human sciences” (p. 63). In the wake of this debate about positivism, Lather (1986b) sees the possibility of a new postpositivist approach to research where the methodological slate has been wiped clean “of prescribed rules and boundaries... [allowing the] ...search for different possibilities of making sense of human life” (p. 259). Lather hopes to take advantage of the current experience of epistemological uncertainty in order to totally reconceptualise the process of producing social knowledge.

In this chapter I discuss some of the alternative empirical models proposed by Lather, focusing in particular on her reconceptualisation of validity in a research setting centrally concerned with social justice. I trace Lather's theoretical progression from her earlier adherence to feminist materialism, a position generally informed by a belief in an empirical reality and in structural forms of oppression, to her more recent encounter with poststructuralism, a mode of inquiry that suggests, at the very least, some kind of problematisation of the notion of a given social 'reality'. As a means of problematising critical theory's postpositivist claims, I point out the surprising similarities between Lather's poststructuralist approach to research and her more 'grounded' materialist focus on methodology. Given these similarities, I suggest that we need to examine more closely the claim that postmodern/poststructuralist theories have moved beyond modernist concerns. Finally, I explore the possibility that poststructuralist approaches to research are still caught up in a search for transcendent forms of knowledge and with policing the bounds of social inquiry. In order to frame this discussion of Lather's purportedly postpositivist research models, I will briefly outline her critique of positivism and her discussion of the merits of postpositivism/postmodernism.

### **Postpositivism and the Politics of Social Inquiry**

Lather (1989) argues that "the relation of politics and social inquiry" (p. 1) has recently come under intense scrutiny from a number of quarters. While feminist, neo-marxist and minority theorists have sought for some time to politicise the realm of social description, for Lather it is the complex and multiple discourses of postmodernism/poststructuralism that have acted as the final catalyst in effecting "a fundamental turning point in social thought" (p. 2). This turning point involves a

paradigmatic shift away from traditional notions of interest-free knowledge towards a conception of knowledge as “contested and partial...[and] shaped by the interplay of language, power and meaning” (p. 2).

Given the increasing politicisation of knowledge production and “the growing acknowledgment of the ways that values permeate what we do in the name of science” (p. 11), Lather (1986a) contends that positivism’s privileged position as “the orthodox approach to doing empirical research in the human sciences” (p. 63) is under siege. While Lather (1989) admits that positivism still dominates the methodological scene, she argues that its hegemony over research practice is being seriously challenged by an “array of alternative ways of knowing” (p. 12). Those discourses once marginalised within the social sciences such as feminist and Freirian participatory research models are gaining recognition as alternative ways of knowing able to compete for legitimacy with the ‘neutral’ sciences (p. 12).

Pivotal to this dispersal of positivist authority is the claim that that the goals of objectivity and neutrality that underpin traditional approaches to research are impossible to achieve. The proponents of “openly ideological” research argue that research based on notions such as scientific neutrality does not provide us with more objective data but instead only serves “to mystify the inherently ideological nature of research in the human sciences” (1986a, p. 64). Post-positivist research, then, is premised on a conception of knowledge that differs markedly from traditional notions. Instead of attempting to access some transcendent and external set of meanings, the post-positivist views knowledge production as “inherently culture-bound and perspectival” (1991, p. 2).

Lather, drawing upon Gramsci's contention that "ideology is the medium through which consciousness and meaningfulness operate in everyday life" (p. 2), argues that research must self-consciously acknowledge the necessarily ideological nature of knowledge production rather than trying to conceal the network of social and power relations in which all research processes occur. Here the notion of ideology that Lather adheres to represents more than the repressive mechanism associated with traditional Marxist notions of false consciousness. Instead, Lather (quoting Sandra Harding) makes a distinction between "coercive values...[such as] racism...that deteriorate objectivity...[and] participatory values...[such as] anti-racism...that decrease distortions and mystifications in our culture's explanations and understandings" (p. 3). The inference here is that advocacy approaches to social inquiry based upon *participatory* values may offer the possibility of producing *less distorted* data. Thus, out of this conception of knowledge production as "historically situated and structurally located" (p. 2) emerges a radical form of intellectual scholarship that establishes its credibility as a legitimate empirical discourse through acknowledging its own biases.

Lather urges scholars to exploit the possibilities opened up by the breakdown of positivist hegemony in order to construct a new *critical* social science that openly identifies with oppositional social movements. Such an approach to social inquiry, Lather argues, would produce research that is less concerned with developing a priori theories than with formulating pragmatic "critical practices [that] derive their forms and meanings in relation to their changing historical conditions" (p. 3). Such critical research derives its empirical authority, then, from being 'grounded' by a specific socio-political transformative agenda rather than relying on some monolithic, imposed social theory.

## Research as Praxis

While the emergence of post-positivist discourses has been accompanied by a general reconceptualisation of *theories* of knowledge, Lather (1991) argues that there has been less impact in the area of *methodology*. She suggests that a critical social science concerned with the politics of emancipation must possess a parallel concern with developing research strategies that “empower those involved to change as well as understand the world” (p. 3). Here Lather utilises Gramsci’s conception of empowerment which necessitates the analysis of “the causes of powerlessness, recognising systematic oppressive forces, and acting both individually and collectively to change the conditions of our lives” (p. 4).

Translating the politics of empowerment into practice requires a change in the focus of research from a concern with merely generating data about structural oppression to a more praxis-oriented social inquiry. For Lather (1986b), the notion of praxis as “the dialectical tension, the interactive, reciprocal shaping of theory and practice” (p. 258) is central to an emancipatory social science. However, she points out that despite the vigorous debate engendered by critical theory, a significant gap exists between emancipatory theoretical claims and the actuality of empirical research.

According to Lather, the radical possibilities of empirical research have been limited by a tendency towards imposing somewhat instrumental, overdetermined theories onto the research process. This imposition of a priori concepts onto the specificities of empirical data “leads to a circle where theory is reinforced by experience conditioned by theory” (p. 261). In order to combat theoretical

determinism, Lather suggests that theory needs to be flexible, open and responsive to “the experiences of people in their daily lives” (p. 261). Following on from Garfinkel’s (1967) work on ethnomethodology, Lather is critical of researchers who view themselves as possessing privileged insights into the world while reducing the status of their informants to that of ‘dupes’ of false consciousness.

Central to Lather’s (1986b) conception of emancipatory, empirical research, then, is a commitment to a dialectical approach to theory building that is “premised on a deep respect for the intellectual and political capacities of the dispossessed” (p. 262). Such a view is tempered by the realisation that “lived experience in an unequal society too often lacks an awareness of the need to struggle against privilege” (p. 262). In developing theories of emancipation, a balance must be obtained between recognising the social agency involved in lived experience and between reflecting at a theoretical level the wider social structures “that shape human experience and perceptions” (p. 262).

Critical social theory is concerned with exploring the intersection between human agency and structural constraint at a theoretical level and with emphasising the importance of “empowering pedagogy [as] an essential step in social transformation” (p. 263). However, these theoretical insights are yet to be carried over into research practice itself. For Lather, researchers concerned with the quest for empowerment need to rethink the goals of empirical research. Once the central focus of research shifts from a concern with obtaining better data to a concern with research as praxis, the relationship between the researcher and the researched (as in Clifford’s postmodern ethnography) takes on a whole new meaning. The key word that characterises this change is *reciprocity*, described by Lather as “a mutual

negotiation of meaning and power...[operating at]...the juncture between researcher and researched and between data and theory” (p. 263).

Lather gives concrete examples of studies that have attempted to include a degree of reciprocity between the researcher and the participants into the structure of their research designs. In one such study the researcher introduced reciprocity into the research process by holding one-to-one and group discussions in order to develop participants’ views (p. 264). The researcher sought to “democratise” the research process by producing “an agreed-upon account of the views of the participants” (p. 262) that was coauthored and negotiated by the participants themselves. However, Lather is critical of this research for being only partially reciprocal. She points out that since reciprocity was not extended to the later stages of the research process the issue of false consciousness was not addressed. In a fully reciprocal research project strategies would be employed “to distinguish between people’s reasoned rejections of interpretations and theoretical arguments and false consciousness” (p. 265).

After examining a number of empowering research methodologies Lather concludes that despite the emancipatory concerns of praxis-oriented work researchers still tend to treat participants as objects or sources of data rather than as active agents capable of collaborating with the researcher in negotiating and constructing social meaning. The latter conception of the informant’s role invites a truly dialectic and interactive approach to research in order to guard against the twin dangers of “top-down impositional practices” in terms of constructing theories of emancipation and the reification of lived experience and participants’ common-sense ways of viewing the world (p. 265).



Similarly, Lather emphasises the need for developing a reciprocal relationship between data and theory. For Lather, emancipatory theory serves a catalytic role in terms of social activism when it resonates “with people’s lived concerns, fears, and aspirations” (p. 267). Rather than imposing universalist, reductive theories onto a complex and indeterminate world, a dialectic approach to theory-building works by “increasing specificity at the contextual level in order to see how larger issues are embedded in the particulars of everyday life” (p. 267). Such a stance requires theory to be flexible and open to counter-interpretations. This dialectical model counters the notion often implicit in emancipatory research, such as neo-Marxist ethnography, that “conceptual validity precedes empirical accuracy” (p. 267). Instead, the more self-reflexive approach advocated by Lather involves empirical evidence being “viewed as a mediator in a constant mutual interrogation between self and theory” (p. 267).

### **The Problem of Validity**

For Lather, self-reflexivity is not only essential to democratising the research process, it is also important for establishing the validity of social data. While the positivist obsession with producing quantifiable, value-free data has been shown to be a futile one, she argues that the goal of producing credible data cannot be discarded. As Lather (1986a) points out “with no ready-made formulae to guarantee valid social knowledge” (p. 66) it is doubly important for praxis-oriented researchers to develop systematic ways of establishing the validity of data. In order to produce social knowledge that has utility for an emancipatory political project, research must be rigorous as well as relevant (p. 67). Lather is concerned that praxis-oriented research guard itself from the accusations of “rampant subjectivity” often aimed at

more phenomenologically based paradigms (p.68). She proposes that researchers “formulate self-corrective techniques that will check the credibility of our data and minimise the distorting effect of personal bias upon the logic of evidence” (p. 65).

In conventional positivist research validity is established through obeying certain preset systematised rules in order to produce quantifiable data. Data trustworthiness focuses on whether data is measurable and reproducible and depends on the apparent elimination of the qualitative or subjective elements present in the research process. Emphasis is placed on statistical “manipulations” that strengthen the appearance of objectivity rather than the reciprocal grounding of theory in empirical data. Paradoxically, such positivist approaches to the problem of data reliability merely produces “consistent subjectivity” (p. 66). As Lather points out, viewing the empirical world as a direct source of objective facts “results in the reification of constructs that are the projections of social biases, masculinity-femininity being but one prime example” (p. 66).

According to Lather, the recognition of the limitations of positivist attempts to produce objective, reliable data by extracting subjective knowledge from the process of theorising is “leading to the reconceptualisation of validity” (p. 66). Postpositivists wanting to move beyond the bounds of “naive empiricism” are increasingly viewing inquiry “as a process whereby tacit (subjective) knowledge and propositional (objective) knowledge are interwoven and mutually informing” (1986b, p. 270). Given that there are no specific rules or procedures that one can follow in order to ensure data reliability, Lather suggests that we need to construct research designs that incorporate self-reflexivity systematically into the fabric of the research process.

Lather refers to a number of praxis-oriented theorists who suggest borrowing validating techniques from traditional research and modifying them to suit the interactive dialogic needs of empowering research methodologies. These theorists suggest that a system of methodological checks paralleling the “major principles of orthodox rigour” needs to be put in place in order to ensure that the process of social inquiry can be seen as “objectively subjective” (p. 270). Developing this theme, Lather offers a set of suggested research strategies that will assist the researcher in putting into practice a reconceptualised model of validity.

Firstly, Lather’s utilisation of the standard sociological research technique of *triangulation* goes beyond the positivist concern with multiple measures to a focus on the need for multiple sources of data, method and theories. For data to be credible the research design needs to be able to acknowledge “counterpatterns” and contradictions as well as predicted patterns (p. 270).

Secondly, *construct validity* involves acknowledging the consciously constructed nature of theory-building in empirical work. However, this process needs to include more than just a self-reflexive focus on the researcher’s own theoretical preconceptions. It must also involve a continual process of referring back to the lived experiences of the research informants in order to guard against theoretical imposition. If praxis-oriented research is going to produce relevant emancipatory social theory, Lather contends that a “*systematised reflexivity*, which reveals how a priori theory has been changed by the logic of the data, becomes essential in establishing construct validity” (p. 271).

Thirdly, *face validity*, dealt with at the most basic level by carrying out “member checks” (where the validity of analysis is vetted by recycling data back

through a sample of respondents), is integral to the process of democratising knowledge as well as establishing data credibility (p. 271). Face validity is a complex notion that overlaps considerably with construct validity. According to Lather, it is an underestimated strategy that needs to become a standard part of emancipatory research designs. However, she warns the researcher that there are limits to the utility of face validity in terms of establishing data credibility given that member checks are always complicated by the problematic but very real issue of false consciousness. Her advice to praxis oriented researchers is that they view the strategy of face validity as “a necessary but not sufficient approach to establishing data credibility” (p. 272).

Finally, Lather proposes the less established notion of *catalytic validity* as a radical strategy for effecting what Freire refers to as “conscientisation”. That is, catalytic validity is a measure of the degree to which the research process “reorients, focuses, and energises participants toward knowing reality in order to transform it” (p. 272). As Lather points out, this category of validity, underpinned as it is by a conception of knowledge production as inextricably linked with issues of power, completely contradicts the positivist notion of researcher neutrality.

Lather’s focus on the problem of validity reflects her concern that research aimed at addressing social inequalities and at producing social change must address issues of empirical accountability as well as issues of social relevance. While praxis-oriented research has dismissed positivist attempts to produce value-free knowledge as futile and conceptually flawed, for Lather this does not mean also discarding methodological rigour. Her notion that openly ideological research can be “objectively subjective” by putting in place minimum standards of validity captures in a nutshell her vision of research practices in a postpositivist

environment. Lather's vision of emancipatory research has undoubted merits but I would suggest that the credibility of her postpositivist claims are somewhat undermined by a number of contradictions apparent in her work. Lather's concern that research should be primarily engaged in empowering oppressed groups rather than with fostering the "career advancement of social scientists built on [the utilisation of] alienating and exploitative [research] methods" (1986a, p. 75) is a commendable one. However, her concern with the oppressed is undermined by her preoccupation with authorising her own validity claims in relation to producing emancipatory forms of knowledge rather than with democratising the research process. Indeed, her desire to give praxis-oriented knowledge an aura of legitimacy suggests that she still adheres to a hierarchical ordering of knowledge where the intellectual armed with the right methodological tools (in this case self-reflexive models of validity) is able to produce truly emancipatory knowledge.

While Lather echoes Rorty in claiming that theory works because it is interesting rather than because it is true, her conversion to a postpositivist paradigm is unconvincing. I would suggest that despite her replacement of the language of positivism with the language of praxis, Lather is still haunted by the positivist spectres of objectivity and neutrality. At the same time as she acknowledges the subjective and partial nature of all research and the futility of positivist attempts to eradicate 'values' from the research process utilising quantitative models, she calls for praxis-oriented researchers to develop systematic methodological strategies in order "to protect our work from our *passions* and *limitations* [my emphasis]" (1986b, p. 272). Thus, while her redefined notions of validity represent a significant attempt to create more emancipatory research practices, it seems that an objectivist model of knowledge still lurks beneath Lather's liberatory intentions.

Linked with Lather's inability to completely break free from the subject-object dichotomy central to the positivist paradigm is her tendency to reify the material world as somehow more 'real' and less 'subjective' than theory-building processes. Lather tends to merely reverse rather than replace the traditional theory-data dichotomy by privileging empirical reality over theoretical abstraction. In doing so, she acknowledges the impossibility of "theory-independent facts" (1986a, p. 77). However, at the same time, she urges the researcher to attempt to reach an empirically pure realm "beyond [theoretical] predisposition" (p. 77). Paradoxically, then, it could be argued that her insistence that all knowledge must be 'grounded' to be credible reinscribes the transcendent, value-free models of knowledge Lather professes to challenge.

### **Validity after poststructuralism: Authorising Reflexivity**

As I have pointed out, Lather's earlier work on research as praxis contains some useful insights into the liberatory possibilities of alternative research methodologies while illustrating some of the theoretical dilemmas facing the feminist materialist wanting to engage with critical theory. However, while Lather purports to be breaking with traditional empirical concerns, it is apparent in her early work on postpositivist forms of validity that she is still concerned with constructing an authoritative scientific discourse and with legislating the boundaries of 'rigorous', empirical research.

In her latest article Fertile Obsession: Validity After Poststructuralism, Lather (1993) once again claims to "rethink validity", this time in response to the challenges of "antifoundationalist discourse theory" (p. 674). In addressing her

latest approach to validity I will examine the ways in which she problematises her earlier more materialist concerns; concerns that revolved around issues of authority, legitimation and the problem of data credibility in emancipatory research. In this later article, Lather wholeheartedly embraces the possibilities of poststructuralism, replacing the language of materialism with a poststructural rhetoric littered with Derridean terms. However, the question remains as to whether this shift in terminology represents anything more than a cosmetic change in relation to Lather's empirical agenda.

The occurrence of conferences on the "End of Science" indicates, Lather argues, that the general crisis of representation experienced across the disciplines has impacted significantly on the field of scientific endeavour highlighting "the impossibility of science" (p. 687). Critiques of realism and universalism have undermined the scientist's ability to legitimate the validity of his/her work through recourse to foundationalist notions of Truth and Reason. Lather sees these critiques as opening up a "postpositivist" space for radical scientists to develop new methodologies that embrace *anti-foundationalism*.

In attempting to formulate alternative approaches to knowledge out of which "a different science might take form" (p. 673), Lather's central concern remains with the topic of validity. However, while seeking to retain validity as a term, she hopes to "both circulate and break with the signs that code it" (p. 674) in a kind of Derridean gesture of simultaneous inscription and erasure. Lather wishes to "rupture validity as a regime of truth" at the same time as holding onto the term as a useful "limit question" for research (p. 674). As she points out, the problem of validity arises even in research informed by antifoundational discourses where debate inevitably occurs over "the importance of appropriate restraints and

regulations” (p. 674). The important point for Lather is that such disagreement cannot be neatly resolved through recourse to some foundational discourse but instead must be framed in terms of an open, dialogic approach to questions of knowledge. Issues of validity must be debated rather than solved in a prescriptive fashion.

Despite not wanting to close off the possibility of dialogic negotiations about the notion of validity, Lather betrays her theoretical allegiances early on in the piece when she admits that, for her, a reconceptualised validity must be *grounded* in a focus on *practice*. Theory cannot exist in a vacuum but must evolve out of and at the same time *valorise* [my emphasis] practice (p. 674). Quoting Marcus and Fischer, Lather argues that in an antifoundational era where stable meanings can no longer be sought in epistemology, “practice becomes the engine of innovation” (p. 674). Put another way, the demise of metanarratives of certainty means that claims to legitimacy devolve to the local level where practice takes precedence over foundationalism.

For Lather, the emergence of postpositivism/postmodernism has been accompanied by a radical shift in the way we conceptualise the act of representation whereby the world is seen as “constructed” rather than “found” (675). Poststructuralist critiques of the notion of the stable referent have foregrounded “how discourse worlds the world” (p. 675). The death of the ‘real’ however does not signify the end of representation. Rather, for Lather, this shift towards viewing the world as discursively constructed only serves to underscore Derrida’s observation regarding “the inescapability of representation” (p. 675). The “crisis of representation” thus involves the recognition that the emphasis of representation must shift from describing the world in objective terms to representing the



discursive complexities of social relations. Rather than looking for meaning in the external world we must instead examine “what frames our seeing” (p. 675), that is we must aim to make visible the implicit ways in which we construct meaning.

With the demise of extradiscursive “epistemological guarantees”, validity becomes reframed as “multiple, partial, endlessly deferred” (p. 675). Lather admits that “various postpositivist efforts” to resolve the problem of validity (for example, qualitative practices such as triangulation and catalytic validity) have proved inadequate if not irrelevant (p. 675). Lather contends that validity can no longer be viewed merely as a problem of methodology that can be solved at a technical level but instead must be viewed, and here she quotes Mishler, as “problematic in a deep theoretical sense” (p. 675).

She concludes that in order to “do” science in a way that does not simply revert to a positivist framework “requires the invention of counter discourses/practices of legitimation” (p. 676). For Lather, such practices involve interrogating representation in a reflexive manner. The researcher must encourage an active dialogue between herself and her readers, a dialogue in which the researcher discusses and debates the problematics of her particular chosen epistemological/methodological framework. Such an approach Lather hopes will liberate research from the constraints of positivism, thus enabling us to formulate new forms of theory and practice. Lather is advocating a kind of validity founded “on a researcher’s ability to explore the resources of different contemporary inquiry problematics” (p. 676).

This new form of validity revolves around making previously implicit norms of legitimation visible. In this way the research process becomes a kind of

*performance* where the theorist/researcher actively *stages* the “poses of methodology” (p. 677). Through a self-conscious revelation of the performative or negotiated aspects of the research process, the postmodern scientist thus signals a fundamental shift away from viewing research as a process of neutral reflection toward an emphasis on meaning and validity as actively *produced*.

Lather envisages the possibility of putting into practice a “transgressive” validity that produces “counter-practices of authority” while at the same time enacting the “crisis of representation” (p. 677). Her hope is that research employing strategies of “excess and categorical scandal” will help to guard against merely reproducing another “regime of truth” (p. 677). Postpositivists who merely invent new prescriptions for doing valid research are seen as policing disciplinary boundaries thereby limiting “the possibilities for a critical social science” (p. 677). Instead, Lather aligns herself with the researcher who is genuinely concerned with questioning the conventions of disciplinary authority. In order to disrupt the legislative practices associated with conventional notions of validity, Lather (quoting Werkmeister), offers “a forthrightly personal and deliberately ephemeral antithesis” (p. 677).

In this vein, Lather discusses four “frames” of validity: validity as simulacra/ironic validity; Derridean rigour/rhizomatic validity; Lyotardian paralogy/neo-pragmatic validity; and voluptuous/situated validity. These four “scandalous categories” represent “performances” of a transgressive approach to validity (p. 683). Lather pairs each mode of validity with an empirical exemplar as a means of illustrating the concrete possibilities of abstract theory.

In particular, her appropriation of Lyotard's model of "legitimation by paralogy", contains parallels with Clifford's reworking of Bahktin's dialogic conception of the novel. Paralogy, in contradistinction to the logic of realism, derives legitimation from a search for incommensurability. It aims to foster heterogeneity and to search for instabilities and tensions rather than consensus thus "undermining...the framework within which previous "normal science" has been conducted" (p. 679). Refusing to construct coherent narratives of closure, paralogy enacts a disruptive (and here Lather quotes Lyotard) "obligation to complexity" (p. 679).

Lather discusses an example of a study looking at African-American women and leadership positions in higher education as an example of the paralogic model in practice. In this study the researcher uses a number of textual strategies in order to problematise her own position as the privileged interpreter. For example, the researcher actively sought dialogue and participation from her "informants" by sending them draft copies of the research in-process. She then constructed a final draft that contained three tales: a realist representation of the research process; a critical tale foregrounding her own "theoretical investments" in the type of analysis she had chosen; and, finally, a deconstructive tale narrated in the third person that draws upon the critical voices of the research participants. In this final section the researcher openly discusses her own hegemonic practices in the research process as a white middle class feminist who has acted in complicity with a feminism that tends to subsume race and difference within the analytic category of gender.

Lather applauds this open self-scrutiny where the researcher has taken active steps "toward unlearning her own privilege and displacing the colonising gaze" (p. 680). By foregrounding the constructed nature of the research design the researcher

is displaced from the position of “master of truth and justice”, instead enacting “her knowledge of language games as she assumes responsibility for the rules and effects of her investments” (p. 680). In this case validity is derived from an attempt to de-authorise knowledge production in order to foster heterogeneity.

Lather offers these alternative frames of validity, then, not as authoritative solutions to problems of legitimacy but as a means of acting out the “crisis of authority that has occurred across knowledge systems” (p. 683). For Lather, the possibilities opened up by this moment of crisis suggest “what was impossible under traditional regimes of truth in the social sciences: a deconstructive problematic that aims not to govern a practice but to theorise it, deprive it of its innocence [and to] pose as a problem what has been offered as a solution” (p. 683). The object of science in the era of post-positivism thus shifts from a focus on “truth” to an examination of “the constitution and annulment of its own text” (p. 683).

### **From Research as Praxis to the Impossibility of Science**

As I have demonstrated, Lather’s earlier work is primarily concerned with the intersection between political praxis and social inquiry. This involves an apparent recognition that knowledge is never neutral but instead is always partial and contested. Lather thus seeks to legitimise alternative ways of doing science that run counter to the positivist obsession with attaining interest-free knowledge. These counter practices involve doing research that openly incorporates its own ideological biases into the research process itself. The credibility of the research project is thus determined in part by its socio-political relevance rather than by quantitative measures of objectivity.

However, while the emergence of such experimental research practices seems to have indicated that we have entered a postpositivist era, Lather is aware that positivism still reigns supreme as the dominant scientific paradigm. She contends, then, that political relevance is not enough “if openly ideological research is to be accepted as data rather than as metaphor by those who do not share its value premises” (1986a, p. 77). She therefore urges praxis-oriented researchers to place as much emphasis on rigour as on relevance in order to ensure the credibility of social data. At this point, despite her desire to produce a postpositivist science, Lather turns to positivistically-based models of validity in order to legitimise her political project. While she attempts to “reconceptualise” positivist notions of validity by incorporating processes of reciprocity and partiality into the research process, her desire to develop “objectively subjective” research reveals an underlying concern with producing ‘better’ models of representation rather than moving beyond the positivist project of neutral social description.

In Lather’s latest work on validity I have discussed her attempts to move ‘beyond representation’ by pointing out the ‘impossibility of science’. Lather’s (1993) concern is with exploring the inventive possibilities of the impossible in order to (quoting Rajchman) “inhabit those moments of actuality in which we are becoming something else than what our history has constructed us to be, those heterotopic moments of our current historical impossibility” (p. 687). Heavily influenced by discourse theory, she attempts to work against “the usual couching of validity in terms of disciplinary maintenance, disciplining the disciplines” (p. 677) by constructing fluid models of validity that mimic positivist concerns in an ironic fashion.

Thus, while previously concerned with authorising praxis-oriented modes of research it seems that Lather now wishes to transcend such disciplinary practices. However, as I suggested earlier, Lather's transition from a feminist materialist concerned with legislating the bounds of rigorous praxis-oriented research to a poststructuralist concerned with utilising the current crisis of authority in order to *de-authorise* prescriptive paradigms of knowledge is not a completely convincing one.

Firstly, at the same time as Lather acknowledges the partial and "grounded" nature of knowledge, her work is underpinned by a desire to transcend historically and discursively situated social meanings in order to enter a realm of "historical impossibility" where a space exists (quoting Derrida) "to say the unsayable...to see the unseeable...or to represent the unrepresentable" (p. 687). While Lather is critical of those postpositivists who merely construct a new 'successor' science replacing positivism, her reification of discourse theory and the libratory possibilities of language opens her up to a similar charge. Furthermore, the notion that there exists some space of impossibility outside of representation available to those theorists who embrace certain libratory practices suggests that Lather's brand of poststructuralism is still driven by a desire to transcend the constraints of authoritative discourses; that is, to access 'interest-free' approaches to knowledge. In my concluding chapter I discuss in more detail this paradoxical postmodern concern with detachment; an ideal which has been characterised by Susan Bordo (1990) as the postmodern "dream of being *everywhere*" (p. 143).

Secondly, I would contend that despite Lather's (1993) attempts to generate non-legislative "counter-practices of authority" (p. 677), her work on validity is founded on a rather prescriptive treatment of reflexivity accompanied by a tendency

to privilege “practice” as a source of pure knowledge untainted by theory. Lather contends that she wishes to move beyond the kind of disciplinary practices evident in her earlier articles where she attempted to set up rather rigid methodological guidelines for praxis-oriented researchers. Instead, Lather sees “the most useful stories about science [as being] those which interrogate representation” (p. 676) in a self-reflexive fashion. While Lather attempts to disguise the authoritative intent of her scientific theories by calling them “stories” or by contending that her statements about validity are merely ironic, her privileging of issues of representation is far from innocent. Instead, this privileging relates to her desire to legitimise a scientific discourse of reflexivity surprisingly similar to the prescriptive forms of validity based on reciprocity privileged in her earlier work.

A final point. In critiquing Lather’s liberatory claims I am not suggesting that her employment of discourse theory has not problematised issues relating to representational authority and foundationalism. Instead, my concern revolves around Lather’s apparent unwillingness to recognise her own ‘will to power’ in wishing to ‘liberate’ us from the constraints of positivism. Rather than privileging discourses of reflexivity, it seems that the lesson that one can take from Lather’s work is the need to foreground the partial and therefore theoretically limited nature of all discourses including poststructuralism.

V

**CONCLUSION : KNOWLEDGE  
WITHOUT FOUNDATIONS**



In this thesis I have utilised Bauman's contention that the interpretive intellectual is increasingly becoming a cultural dominant in order to frame my discussion. I have examined the work of three theorists who I see as exemplars of this emergent phenomenon occurring within the humanities. While the work of the theorists on which I have chosen to focus differs in significant ways, the striking parallels between their basic epistemological (or perhaps, more correctly, anti-epistemological) concerns do indeed support Bauman's assertion that we have witnessed a major shift towards a new approach to theories of knowledge.

However, while Bauman's legislative/interpretive model has proved a useful cognitive frame through which to view the anti-legislative stance taken by these theorists in their pragmatically oriented work, I want to turn this debate about knowledge away from Bauman's thesis to a focus on what I see as primarily a shift towards *anti-foundationalism*. This may seem on the surface to be a rather subtle change in focus given that Bauman's notion of the interpretive intellectual seems to overlap considerably with the goals and ideals of anti-foundationalism. However, my desire to shift the focus away from Bauman's legislative/interpretive dichotomy, stems from the difficulties I perceive to be inherent in such an oppositional construction of intellectualism, and in its implications in terms of the relations between power and knowledge.

As I have analysed the various models of knowledge offered by Rorty, Clifford and Lather, it has become apparent that the notion that the intellectual can somehow escape legislative or legitimacy concerns is a problematic and misleading one. As I have indicated in my reading of Lather's work for example, while the intellectual may make a conscious attempt to move beyond legislative concerns it is not possible

to operate outside of a wider context of social and power relations. The notion of anti-foundationalism, then, captures the spirit of an intellectual movement concerned with dethroning foundational approaches to knowledge and disrupting the modern faith in myths of certainty. At the same time it allows for and acknowledges the legislative and repressive possibilities of such an apparently liberatory movement.

In focusing on various strategies employed by theorists in response to the current crisis of intellectual authority, I have tried to capture the complex and often contradictory nature of anti-foundationalism's liberatory claims. Bauman's discussion of the legislative intellectual draws attention to the obvious tension between liberatory social movements concerned with the affirmation of difference and a modern tradition underpinned by discourses of order and certainty. However, what I have sought to emphasise is the equally problematic relationship between such liberatory movements and the supposed emancipatory discourse of anti-foundationalism or postmodernism. In order to further clarify this problematic I will briefly summarise the main points of anti-foundationalism. I will then introduce Foucault's conception of knowledge into the discussion in order to underscore the ambiguity of the anti-foundationalist position in relation to discourses of emancipation.

While the three theorists discussed in this thesis hail from very different disciplinary and critical positions, as anti-foundationalists they are unified in their critique of the politically oppressive effects of epistemology. For these theorists, the notion of epistemology is problematic because it presumes that the intellectual can comprehend all social objects from "a God's eye rationalist perspective" (Lather, 1989, p. 6). As anti-legislative theorists, they are critical of the kind of intellectual

who uses epistemology or ‘grand’ theory in order to claim for themselves a unique status as controllers and generators of knowledge. Epistemology, they argue, is utilised by legislative intellectuals in order to defend themselves against the contingency of knowledge and “to deny or mask their own specific institutional limits” (Wickham, 1990, p. 2). In the process of searching for a grand overview of the world, these totalising intellectuals shift the focus away from “specific calculations made by definite actors in specific locations” (p. 2) and thereby depoliticise/decontextualise the process of knowledge production.

In contrast, the anti-foundationalist is concerned with privileging models of knowledge that focus on the specific ‘pragmatics’ of everyday experience. Their concern is with promoting multi-perspectival, pluralist approaches to knowledge in order to challenge the cultural hegemony of totalising and exclusionary claims to universal truth. Anti-foundationalism suggests an innate concern with the way in which modern intellectualism with its focus on epistemology inevitably excludes and represses difference. Both Clifford and Lather profess an interest in the way that conventional approaches to representation involve marginalising or silencing the voices of the subaltern while Rorty is critical of foundationalist philosophies that constrain the possibilities of free and open dialogue. The anti-foundationalist’s focus on the dominatory tendencies associated with conventional epistemologically-based approaches to knowledge intersects with Foucault’s conception of knowledge. However, as we will see, a Foucauldian approach to knowledge paradoxically problematises some of the basic premises underpinning anti-foundationalism.

Foucault, as a major contributor to contemporary conceptualisations of power relations, portrays knowledge as being produced within, and as an effect of, particular discursive formations; that is, systems of signification or practice. For

Foucault, discourse is more than an effect of language. Instead, he sees knowledge production as being embedded in everyday social practices and institutions. Like the anti-foundationalist, he rejects the modern contention that one truth/reality exists outside of discursive relations, accessible to the autonomous intellectual via the tools of reason and rationality. Rather, he shows that such modern metanarratives are themselves merely discourses or “competing ways of giving meaning to the world” (Weedon, 1987, p. 35). Foucault suggests that the totalising theories of the Enlightenment attained primacy in Western culture not by providing better or truer representations of ‘reality’ but through suppressing competing forms of knowledge or meaning production.

Like Rorty, Foucault is not interested in testing the veracity of Enlightenment claims to truth. Instead, his concern lies with what he calls “regimes of truth”, that is, he is interested “in seeing historically how *effects of truth* are produced within discourses which in themselves are neither true nor false [my emphasis]” (quoted in Rabinow, 1986, p. 240). His conception of knowledge proposes that for the modern world to maintain its central concern with truth and order, all that threatens to challenge this systematised fiction must be silenced or marginalised. Foucault’s notion of competing knowledge claims seems to complement an anti-foundationalist emancipatory project concerned with creating a space in which the multiple voices of the ‘other’ might be heard.

However, the corollary of Foucault’s analysis is that *all* knowledge claims, not just claims to truth, must be seen to be embedded in power relations and social practices. If such a conception of knowledge is accepted then ostensibly liberatory discourses, such as those associated with anti-foundationalism, become implicated in the very repressive and disciplinary mechanisms they seek to deconstruct.

Foucauldian theory suggests that anti-foundational discourses of uncertainty and indeterminacy are far from innocent stories written in order to liberate the ‘other’ from legislative modern discourses. Thus, such ‘interpretive’ discourses represent more than just alternative conceptions of knowledge. Rather, like modern regimes of truth, anti-foundationalism is inevitably constituted by, and at the same time constituting of, a wider network of power relations.

In relation to modern metanarratives of truth, Foucault points out that such regimes are “not merely ideological or superstructural [but instead represent] a condition of the formation and development of capitalism” (quoted in Rabinow, 1986, p. 240). Here I would like to suggest that if we are to contextualise anti-foundationalism in terms of social practices then it is important to acknowledge its role in relation to late capitalism. As I outlined briefly in chapter one, a number of theorists including Jameson and Zavarzadeh, have suggested that the anti-foundationalist’s celebration of difference may be determined more by the cultural logic of late capitalism than by a radical project of emancipation. It seems, then, that calls to abandon totalising narratives on the grounds of encouraging more liberatory, pluralist approaches to representation must be examined more closely in terms of the conservative possibilities of such an anti-foundationalist move.

### **Embracing Ambivalence: The New Regime of Difference**

Susan Bordo (1990), in writing about some of the problems facing feminists who engage in a “programmatic appropriation of poststructuralist insight” (p. 136) is critical of what she sees as the conservative possibilities of anti-foundationalism. Bordo perceives postmodernism as having contributed to feminist theory in a

number of important ways. For example, postmodern theory has provided feminism with “the invaluable insight that gender forms only one axis of a complex, heterogeneous construction, constantly interpenetrating...with multiple other axes of identity” (p. 139). However, Bordo is critical of the tendency to convert “this insight into *the* authoritative insight” (p. 139). She voices concern about the legislative bent associated with a “dogma that [insists that] the only ‘correct’ perspective on race, class and gender is the affirmation of difference” (p. 139).

For Bordo, this postmodern preoccupation with celebrating difference for the sake of difference is underpinned by a utopian ideal of disembodied knowledge: “a dream of being *everywhere*” (p. 143). While the anti-foundationalist is critical of the modern intellectual’s endless search for an authoritative Archimedean viewpoint outside of the influence of history and culture, Bordo contends that postmodernism/anti-foundationalism, with its focus on “ceaseless textual play...may slip into its own fantasy of escape from human locateness-by supposing that the critic can become wholly protean by adopting endlessly shifting, seemingly inexhaustible vantage points, none of which are ‘owned’ by either the critic or the author of a text under examination” (p. 142). Her point is that theorists who celebrate the possibilities of “narrative heteroglossia” and “epistemological *jouissance*” run the risk of obscuring “the located, limited, inescapably partial, and *always* personally invested nature of human ‘story making’” (p. 144).

Bordo argues that the project of embracing heterogeneity must involve an acknowledgment of the impossibility of actually achieving multiplicity. She contends that an appreciation of difference depends on the recognition that there are limits and boundaries that constrain us. Without the recognition of such limits the notion of difference itself fades away into sameness. By effacing these limits, the

postmodernist demonstrates “a resistance to the recognition that one is always *somewhere*, and limited” (p. 145). Bordo points out that in order to overcome the Cartesian preoccupation with transcendence, the postmodernist needs to do more than merely replace “metaphors of spectatorship” with discourses of heteroglossia (p. 145). Instead, she urges postmodernism “to relinquish all fantasies of epistemological conquest, not only those that are soberly fixed on necessity and unity but also those that are intoxicated with *possibility* and *plurality*[my emphasis]” (p. 145). She concludes, then, that despite the antifoundationalist’s explicit rejection of a representational model underpinned by a correspondence view of reality, the unthinking affirmation of difference “reveals a longing for adequate representations-unlike Cartesian conceptions, but no less ambitiously, of a relentlessly heterogeneous reality” (p. 145).

Given the conservative implications of what Bordo sees as anti-foundationalism’s “theoretical deconstruction of locatedness” (p. 145), the question remains as to what the concrete political implications of such a theoretical stance might entail. Does this apparently liberating critique really free us to “create our own individual and collective lives, to articulate our own voices, to diffuse the ‘Other’ into just one more other” (Haber, 1994, p. 113)? Like Bordo, the feminist theorist Honi Haber has doubts about the possibilities for empowerment offered by a post-philosophical model that “insists everywhere on difference and the illegitimacy of a subject position” (p. 113). For Haber some kind of “identity formation” is necessary for “political resistance” (p. 114). As she points out, the “demand to universalise difference [becomes problematic for a politics of resistance because it asks us] to foreclose on the possibility of the subject, be it individual or communal” (114).

It seems that rather than opening up a conversation between peoples, anti-foundationalism's refusal to acknowledge generalisable claims of any sort and its unthinking obeisance to what Haber terms "the law of difference" (p. 114) actually serves to silence those marginalised groups who are attempting to voice their shared experiences of oppression for the first time. As within an exclusionary modernist paradigm, the anti-foundationalist tends to suppress difference since it is the privileged perspective/position of white male philosophers, as the arbiters of what constitutes politically correct knowledge/truth, that is being reinforced. Haber's highlighting of this legislative aspect of postmodernism strikes a chord with Jameson's warning that the politics of pluralism may have more to do with the pluralist logic of capitalism than a politics of empowerment. In this sense, anti-foundationalism can be interpreted as becoming "the new common sense of liberal pedagogy and culture" (Zavarzadeh, 1992, p. 30). As such it offers a framework for resolving debates "which arise from the contradictions of daily life under capitalist labour relations" (p. 31). The 'logic' of anti-foundationalism could be said to appeal especially to those social groups acutely aware of the contradictions inherent between their professed Leftist politics, on the one hand, and an evident material privilege, on the other.

### **The Cultural Logic of Liberal Pluralism**

As I pointed out in my discussion of Rorty's conversational model of knowledge, the kind of cultural pluralism advocated by anti-foundationalism parallels, in a number of ways, the goals and ideals of political liberalism. However, despite his stated allegiance with 'bourgeois liberalism', Rorty denies any attempt at legitimating liberalism in a foundational sense. Instead, he advocates an anti-



foundationalist political stance that moves beyond the bounds of ideology. As opposed to a Philosophical liberalism grounded in universalist Kantian ideals, Rorty claims his support of liberalism is a purely pragmatic one; “a mere ‘contingent’ historical matter” (Burrows, 1990, p. 325).

Burrows, a feminist philosopher who sees Rorty’s pragmatism as a philosophical apology for liberal conservatism, is sceptical as to whether Rorty’s anti-foundationalist approach to liberalism can stand up to close scrutiny. For Burrows, Rorty’s application of contingency, reliant as it is on liberal notions of the distanced, detached individual able to make ‘free choices’, is “reminiscent...of philosophical defences of liberal pluralism” (p. 326). Thus, she argues that Rorty’s pragmatism is difficult to distinguish from philosophical liberalism making “his desire to do away with ideology” (p. 326) unconvincing. Burrows finally concludes that Rorty, despite his claims to the contrary, is still “peddling liberal ideology” (p. 331). While Rorty professes to have moved beyond ‘foundationalism’ in the modernist sense of the word, it is apparent that his notions of pragmatism, in particular, his presumption of a rational autonomous subject are still *founded* on liberal ideals. The point that I am making here is that anti-foundationalism, as represented in Rorty’s work, tends to conceal rather than explore its own social and political affiliations.

Given this lack of attendance to the possibility of its own repressive and exclusionary biases, the radical posturing of anti-foundationalist theory translates into a rather conservative political model that is distinctly limited in terms of its pluralist promise. As Burrows (1990) points out, from the perspective of the politically oppressed individual, the anti-foundationalist’s relentless focus on heterogeneity in place of systematised accounts of social relations merely serves to

obscure rather than demystify such structures of dominance and subordination. Rorty's liberal has the luxury of being able to disengage with 'theory' and to ignore the relations between knowledge and power precisely because he/she is "already part of a dominant status quo" (p. 332) that has no need to defend itself on ideological grounds. Furthermore, Burrows contends that the fact that Rorty's interpretive intellectual is able to take such a pragmatic position has more to do with the "material circumstances of advantage in the historical-economic-political situation of the world at large" (p. 332) than with any personal choice the intellectual might have in relation to theory or ideology.

### **Defusing/Diffusing Difference: Diversity as a Discourse of Conservatism**

Political philosopher, John Gray (1993), in his account of the politics of cultural diversity, further confirms the suspicion that anti-foundationalist thought may lead to a conservative, rather than a radical, politics of difference. Gray, who identifies his political leanings as being towards conservative *post*-liberalism, is interested in investigating which political forms are "best suited to a condition of society marked by substantial cultural diversity" (p. 253). Through briefly discussing his critique of foundationalist approaches to political theory, I will demonstrate the striking similarity between the premises and goals of Gray's political conservatism and the pragmatic anti-foundationalism of Rorty's conversational approach to political issues.

Gray argues, like Rorty, that cultural pluralism, defined by Gray as "a diversity of possibly incommensurable values and world views[,]...ought to be at the top of the political agenda of modern states" (p. 253). He is critical of modern politics that

seek to “embody or express the cultural identity of homogeneous moral communities” (p. 254). According to Gray, such a political goal is founded upon a flawed conception of human identity. While Gray is critical of the notion of the centred, humanist subject that underpins “all the dominant forms of liberalism, conservatism and socialism” (p. 254), he reserves his most scathing comments for the Marxist ideal of a quintessential human subject liberated “from ersatz and oppressive cultural identities” (p. 255). Gray interprets Marx’s social theories, as well as his thoughts on community, as being centrally concerned with eradicating the pluralist notion of the subject as an “autonomous individual with access to a variety of forms of life and modes of thought” (p. 256). Gray concludes that “the elimination of the modern expression of human identity as individuality” (p. 256) has always been a central doctrine of Marxist theory.

For Gray, the political failures of the Marxian project confirm the inadequacies of such an essentialist view of human identity. In contrast to the model of a universal and coherent subject, Gray, echoing antifoundationalist notions of the subject, posits that “personal identity is not a natural fact but a cultural artefact” (p. 258). In a postmodern society where “status hierarchies are permeable, roles complex and often conflicting and social monitoring of personal behaviour intermittent and weak”, the liberal conception of the autonomous individual is, more or less he argues, an “historical reality” (p. 259). However, like Rorty, Gray does not see this fact as confirming the essential truth of liberalism in any foundational sense. Rather, Gray’s liberal individual is the local and historical “distillation of modern experience” (p. 259) rather than the representative of an innate, universal, human subjectivity.

According to Gray, then, the strength of his own conservative philosophy lies in its acceptance of the contingent and conventional nature of identity. This focus on “the local character of our experience of individuality” involves dispelling the liberal humanist myth of the transcendent sovereign subject “distanced from all social convention and heir to no tradition” (p. 259). Thus, Gray is not only critical of the kind of dogmatic universalism found in Marxist theories of subjectivity, he also seeks to undermine the notions of autonomy and individuality underpinning the more traditional liberalism associated with, for example, the writings of J. S. Mills. While Millian liberalism promises individual autonomy through a rejection of tradition and convention, Gray argues that in practice it represents “a force for cultural homogeneity and against diversity, a political tendency for which progress is more important than liberty” (p. 260).

Gray’s concern with disrupting traditional liberal tendencies towards cultural conformity seems to offer political possibilities to those social movements concerned with enabling previously silenced social groups to be heard in political debates. However, as Bordo’s critique of the postmodern obsession with difference highlighted, the anti-foundationalist’s conception of pluralism, difference and identity may paradoxically work against a politics of emancipation. Gray’s alternative to the liberal humanist subject embodies the problematic relationship between anti-foundationalism and discourses of emancipation.

For Gray, conservative thought is useful in terms of conceptualising a pluralist politics because it points out that individual identities “are constituted and not encumbered by the forms of life that we inherit” (p. 261). However, for Gray problems arise when the liberal conservative joins the Leftist communitarian theorist in suggesting that “identity is contoured by membership in a single moral

community and mirrored in the institutions of a single political order” (p. 261). While Gray applauds conservative attempts to “elevate the particulars of concrete practice over the delusive universals of abstract theorising” (p. 262), he is sceptical of the utility of the notion of a *radically situated self*. In contrast, he points out that the identity of the modern subject is not defined by membership to one coherent community but rather draws upon a “cultural inheritance” that is at once complex and contradictory, resulting in an equally complex and plural experience of subjectivity (p. 262). For Gray, the attempt to bring certainty into the realm of subjectivity is a denial of the “experience of marginality” that he argues is central to the modern subject (p. 263). The kind of polity that Gray sees as coexisting best with “the subtle mosaic of traditions which is modern society”, is a limited form of government that avoids attempting to legislate the bounds of a “seamless community” by suppressing cultural diversity (p. 265).

While Gray’s ideals are commendable, they seem to offer little political ammunition to the theorist concerned with overturning systematic forms of oppression. Once again his conception of the subject as fluid and unconstrained suggests he too is caught up in the postmodern ‘dream of everywhere’ rather than concerned with the material realities of difference and diversity. Those attempting to theorise the complex relations between social identity, power and agency would no doubt readily agree with Gray’s critique of essentialist notions of the self. However, the alternative model of subjectivity offered by Gray is, I would argue, less convincing.

Given the parallels between liberal conservatism and anti-foundationalism, it is no surprise that emancipatory social movements like feminism suspect that postmodern pluralism is simply a replacement for liberal humanism as a new

doctrine of oppression. From the perspective of the subaltern, this new doctrine serves to eradicate locatedness rather than prevent the suppression of difference. As Foucauldian discourse theory indicates, we cannot act extradiscursively. Instead, we are always limited by our positionality or perspective within a particular discursive field. While anti-foundationalism allows us to see the socially and historically constructed nature of difference, such an insight does not eradicate the fact that social categories such as gender still *locate* and *limit* us in a material sense (Bordo, 1990, p. 148). Even when we attempt to deconstruct these subject positions we cannot avoid the danger of domination or exclusion. As Richard Fox (1991) points out in his critique of postmodern ethnography “the modern West [cannot] write off its culpability in quick-and-dirty confessions: the other constructed in the past cannot so easily be disembodied from present global relations” (p. 5). Power relations are ever present in the ethnographic process and cannot merely be “dispersed” through recourse to the kind of dialogic methodology or textual style advocated by Clifford.

It seems then that the desire for pluralism is a problematic libertarian ideal given that it demonstrates little regard for the structural constraints that locate and limit us as social subjects. Moreover, the notion of pluralism (or its textual equivalent heteroglossia) refuses to recognise the presence of any kind of hierarchy of oppression. To paraphrase Di Stefano (1990), such a pluralist approach disallows the possibility that some kinds of difference, such as gender, make more of a difference than others (p. 78). As Craig Owens (1983) succinctly states, “pluralism...reduces us to being an other among others; it is not a recognition, but a reduction of difference to absolute indifference, equivalence, interchangeability” (p. 58).

Given the politically conservative possibilities of anti-foundationalism that I have mapped out in this thesis, we are forced to view with some scepticism Bauman's suggestion that the interpretive intellectual is solely concerned with developing new, anti-legislative approaches to knowledge.<sup>1</sup> I have suggested that what is missing from Bauman's account is an adequate treatment of the complex relationship between power and knowledge. If we accept, even to some degree, Foucault's contention that all knowledge claims are part of a system of competing discourses which "necessarily inflict violence on things, ourselves and other persons" (Flax, 1990, p. 236) then the legislative tendencies underpinning not only the work of 'foundationalist' theorists but also that of the 'antitheory' community, must be acknowledged. While on the surface the shift towards discourses of ambivalence and uncertainty appear to provide a much needed anti-legislative counterbalance to the modern concern with order and truth, anti-foundationalism too can be accused of a kind of legislative logic. The polemical neo-Marxist, Mas'ud Zavarzadeh (1992), sums up the conservative consequences of postmodern theory by pointing out that "undecidability...is the regime of signification that legitimates (post)colonialism by producing modes of intelligibility that render all forms of 'certainty' (revolutionary interruption and transformation of the economic world order) 'passé'" (p. 43).

### **Beyond Certainty/Ambivalence: The Cosmopolitan Intellectual**

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<sup>1</sup> Here I might be accused of representing Bauman's argument a little too simplistically given that in *Modernity and Ambivalence* he does acknowledge the conservative possibilities of a market-driven postmodern pluralism that reduces the tolerance of difference to indifference. However, the point that I am making is that Bauman still suggests that the intellectual can embrace a mode of ambivalence autonomous from the legislative desires of the state and the market.

In this thesis, I have identified the occurrence of a major shift within the humanities in the way that knowledge production is viewed. Such a shift involves a major realignment, rather than a dispersal, of intellectual authority. Through problematising the act of representation, postmodern and anti-foundational discourses have opened up the possibility of more critical, self-reflexive approaches to socio-cultural analysis. At the same time, the anti-legislative alternatives proposed by proponents of the 'interpretive' turn appear to be potentially no less conservative than their modernist precursors. The task, then, must be to take advantage of the space opened up by the current crisis of authority in order to construct alternative theories of knowledge that move beyond legislative/interpretive, foundational/anti-foundational dichotomies.

Rabinow (1986), in his writings on modernity and postmodernity in anthropology, provides a frame of interpretation that resonates with some of the concerns I have raised so far while also suggesting a starting point from which to pursue alternative and more radical modes of intellectual authority. He proposes we view the 'new' intellectual as a "critical, cosmopolitan" (p. 258). For Rabinow, this involves taking up an oppositional stance where "one [is] suspicious of sovereign powers, universal truths, overly relativised preciousness, local authenticity, moralisms high and low" (p. 258). Central to such a stance is a willingness to open oneself up to alternative and incommensurate discourses while at the same time recognising ones own "imperial tendencies" (p. 258).

Rabinow defines cosmopolitanism as a contemporary condition of existence and "an ethos of macro-interdependencies, [that entails] an acute consciousness (often forced upon people) of the inescapabilities and particularities of places, characters, historical trajectories, and fates" (p. 258). As we have seen, social theorists tend to



either reify the local or to construct grand theories of difference that efface the specificity of social identity. If we discard any notion of identity then we run the risk of reverting to the kind of ‘neutral’ representations of humanity that characterised the modern search for cultural order. The heteroglossic ideals discussed in this thesis must be tempered by the realisation that we are not all equally placed to engage in dialogic encounters. In the light of this realisation, Rorty’s presumption that as ‘rational’ subjects we can reduce debates about knowledge down to issues of pragmatism, without acknowledging the presence of social constraints, becomes highly problematic. Of course, in holding onto some notion of identity and locatedness, no matter how self-conscious, we must guard against the tendency to replicate rather than disrupt rationalist, universalist discourse. It seems that we can never hope to perfect the balancing act between recognising knowledges/identities as inevitably situated and wishing to deconstruct and move beyond the situated nature of experience. However, what we can do is construct more complex and fluid models of experience that acknowledge the “specificity of historical experience[s] and place[s], however complex and contestable they might be [while recognising the] worldwide macro-interdependency encompassing any local particularity” (p. 258).

Expanding on Rabinow’s evocative figure of the cosmopolitan intellectual, I would suggest that such an intellectual needs to look to truly plural models of representation that refuse to construct totalising overviews of social ‘reality’, or to reify narrow dichotomous categorisations of social experience. The approach I would advocate draws upon pragmatism in terms of displacing notions of truth with issues of utility but directs this notion of utility in a more openly politicised direction. For me, such a move is closely affiliated with Deleuze and Foucault’s notion of “theory as a toolkit” where theory is viewed not as a system but as “an

instrument, a *logic* of the specificity of power relations and the struggles around them” (quoted in Clifford, 1983, p. 119). My conception of cosmopolitanism relies, then, on a kind of *politicised pragmatism* where the focus is on the *situated* nature of knowledge and identity in terms of recognising an immediate local set of power relations. At the same time such a politicised approach acknowledges Rabinow’s more global notion of macro-interdependency. Within such a model the cosmopolitan intellectual recognises the socially constructed and historically situated nature of categories like legislative/interpretive, certainty/uncertainty, foundationalism/anti-foundationalism, and the way that they are implicated and interwoven within Foucault’s network of knowledge and power relations. The task for the self-proclaimed emancipatory intellectual, then, is to both deconstruct such dualisms in the hope of exploring alternative conceptions while recognising his/her own engagement with hegemonic discourses.

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